

**LIVING DIFFERENTLY:  
GAY MALE UNDERGRADUATES' STUDENT EXPERIENCES**

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I present a snapshot of the university lives and experiences of 17 gay male undergraduate students attending an institution in the UK. I draw upon thematic analysis of data obtained from individual, in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. My main focus of investigation is the ways in which participants' higher education biographies compare and contrast with dominant accounts of the gay student experience, which are characterised by intolerance, harassment, victimisation, heterosexism and homophobia.

My theoretical framework is derived from university space being, like all non-gay-specific space, pervaded by discourses of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) and the workings of the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990). I am interested in how participants produced, expressed, managed and negotiated their alternative identities in these higher education settings. I therefore interrogate the role and importance participants ascribed their gayness at university, the effect and influence of their sexuality on their university choices and on their relationships with flatmates, their coming out narratives and experiences in higher education, and their behavioural management and performative expressions of identity within university spaces. This range of analysis is informed by a variety of disciplines and fields of study, including sociology, sexuality, gender, psychology, and human geography.

Findings often contrast with those typically reported in academic literature, both in participants' marked decentralisation of their non-heterosexuality in self-identification, and in portrayals of gay students as other than as victims of harassment, discrimination and persecution. Although participants are very much aware of the regulatory heteronormative mechanisms of straight discourses operating within university spaces, they are highly sensitive and skilled in expressing, monitoring, adapting, asserting and negotiating their identities in these environments. In fact, participants framed university as a generally positive, tolerant, accepting and happy place in which to be gay. I therefore argue that these 'new' stories and ways of 'living differently' should be acknowledged to enrich and further understanding of this population's experiences within higher education.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: LIVING DIFFERENTLY?

I've absolutely loved my first year at uni ... It has just been such a defining year for me this year. I've come here on my own and I love it you know. I'm single and independent and working for something without my parents badgering me about it all the time, and I'm doing OK. And I met amazing people, love the city, had some great fun, and I absolutely couldn't have asked for a better time. So yeah I've just loved it, loved it. (Noah – a participant in this study)

Higher education 'presents challenges as well as opportunities' (Smith and Wertlieb 2005 p. 154) for students. A place at university may be viewed as a means to further and fulfil personal, academic and career ambitions, yet all students also have to adapt to unfamiliar social and academic environments, cultures and roles; encourage, map and nurture new friendship networks; learn to be independent; and take responsibility for financial, social and academic decisions and actions (Holmstrom et al. 2002; Stone and Tippet 2004). Those students who self-identify as gay, however, are said to face 'unique challenges' (Rankin 2005 p. 17) within higher education because of their sexuality, and these are seemingly ubiquitously equated with disempowerment, marginalisation, harassment, victimisation and fear.

It may be expected that the increasingly positive social, cultural and political climates for gay people (Weeks 2007) as indicated by, for example, the repeal of discriminatory legislation (e.g. the equalisation of the age of consent) and introduction of civil partnerships, would be reflected in reports of growing acceptance and support of homosexuality. However, as Brown (2008) cautions, 'while social attitudes have become more tolerant in many places, this does not mean that fear of difference has been overcome' (p. 1222). This sentiment is supported in the large body of literature detailing heterosexist and homophobic attitudes (and behaviour) towards gay people in general, and gay students in particular (as reviewed in Chapter 2). A tension therefore exists between proclamations that increased visibility and awareness of non-heterosexualities has led to free and open expression of alternative ways of being, and findings from academic research which reinscribe harassment, fearfulness and victimisation as the norm for gay people.

In this thesis I explore stories around sexuality and higher education, and address the extent to which perceptions, assumptions and expectations of these climates being accepting of diversity and difference are actually met. I present findings from a qualitative study on the university experiences of 17 gay male undergraduate students attending an institution in the UK, and detail and interrogate the many and diverse ways in which their sexuality impacted upon and mediated their choices, relationships, behaviour and experiences within this space. In this Introduction I map out the study by detailing the conceptual underpinnings of the project (Section 1), and then take a reflexive turn and discuss my autobiography of the question (Section 2). Finally, I present my research questions, and provide an overview of the structure and contents of the thesis (Section 3).

### **Section 1. Conceptual underpinnings**

Here I locate the study within a broadly painted overarching theoretically-informed framework, the conceptual underpinnings of which are then woven through, developed and elaborated upon in each of the following chapters.

First, at a general level, I am interested in the different types of stories told of the gay student experience. Following his discussion of the historical formation of ideas and ways of being, and how these are dynamic within ever-shifting hierarchies and positions of potency and influence, Raymond Williams' (1977) conceptualisation and definition of dominant, emergent and residual social practices map particularly well on to the different gay student narratives detailed in this thesis. Dominant practices are (re)inscribed by the majority and thus become hegemonic, a position they maintain by ignoring and repressing alternative ways of being; emergent are new practices different from the dominant order; and residual are practices from earlier social formations but which remain active, albeit in a minor role. Williams' work provides a framework within which to situate my participants' accounts of their lives in higher education, compare / contrast them to the traditional, conventional, typical and expected stories (i.e. the dominant), and propose possible explanations for similarities and differences between

them<sup>1</sup>.

The first part of this PhD's sub-title, '*Living differently*', alludes to there being different types of accounts of the gay student experience. It may also suggest that the study will compare the narratives of hetero- and homo-sexual students, and imply that this thesis will assimilate into the large body of work (as discussed in Chapter 2) which frequently positions gay students as psychologically, socially and academically disadvantaged in relation to their straight peers. However, although I do address the ways in which (non-hetero)sexuality shapes higher educational experiences, the 'difference' in the title does not refer to gay / straight comparisons, but comparisons between the university biographies of my participants and those of gay students typically reported in the academic literature<sup>2</sup> - as indicated by Noah's opening quote to this chapter.

Secondly, in terms of the actual research, the conceiving, designing, undertaking and presentation of this study was informed by feminist epistemology. I substantively discuss this in Chapter 3.

As regards analysis (as presented in chapters 4 to 8), throughout this thesis I draw upon a range of disciplinary areas and fields of study (including sociology, sexuality, gender and psychology) to frame and inform my findings, assertions and conclusions concerning the ways in which gay students' sexuality intersects with their lives in higher education. Human geography is particularly relevant to the project, especially work addressing intersections of space and sexuality (Oswin 2008; Visser 2008).

As Binnie (1997), Lim (2004), Valentine (1996) and others note, space is not asexual, but actively constructed to reflect, assert and promote particular ways of being. My premise is that university space, like all non-gay specific space, is produced, organised

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<sup>1</sup> See Epstein and Johnson (1998) for a discussion on how Williams' definitions of the emergent and the residual respectively map on to Derrida's semiotic concepts of 'the dangerous supplement' and 'the trace'. The supplement 'insinuates itself in the-place-of' (Derrida 1976 p. 145), thereby 'threatening substitution [and] promising change' (Epstein and Johnson 1998 p. 42). The trace refers to how although the meanings of signifiers (such as words) may change over time, they carry (to varying degrees of potency) their historical associations with them. I return to the concept of trace in Chapter 6 when discussing participants' assertions that their flatmates' jokes and comments which could be read as anti-gay were meant in jest and devoid of homophobic sentiment.

<sup>2</sup> My reasons for not undertaking a comparative study between gay and straight students are discussed in Chapter 3, which details the study's methodology.

and managed to express, position and keep as dominant social, cultural and political discourses<sup>3</sup> which are almost exclusively heterosexual (Duncan 1996b; Myslik 1996; Valentine 1993a, b).

The various practices which straighten space are the workings of what Butler (1990) terms the heterosexual matrix, which positions heterosexuality as normal, natural, inevitable, and the only legitimate sexuality. As I detail below, heterosexual hegemony is maintained through the promotion and assertion, and performative reinscription, of discursive tropes; the erasure of alternative (i.e. non-straight) lives through unacknowledgement; and also policing and regulation to encourage (re)alignment to heterosexual discourses.

Straightness is spatially (re)produced through ideological, linguistic and symbolic representations in space, which people are encouraged to adopt and 'buy into'. Hence, the saturation of overt heterosexualised images and messages in the media (e.g. advertisements referring to the nuclear family and heterosexual couples, music played in shopping centres addressing heterosexual relationships) and the continuous enactment and explicit visibility of heterosexualised ways of being in public environments (e.g. members of the opposite sex holding hands and kissing in the street) (Rushbrook 2002; Valentine 1996). Indeed, such is the aggressiveness of this lifestyle marketing that 'no matter where one looks, it seems, one can see heterosexual socio-spatial patternings at work' (Hubbard 2001 p. 58). Conversely, alternative lives are not acknowledged. This 'silence and absence of sexuality outside of the heterosexual norm' (Snyder and Broadway 2004 p. 629) posits heterosexuality as universal / unproblematic / natural / acceptable / right / moral / healthy, and simultaneously insinuates that non-heterosexuality is deviant, abnormal and 'wrong' (Robinson et al. 2004).

In addition to such heavy reinscription of its norms and ideology and the non-acknowledgement of others, discourses of heterosexuality are kept as 'compulsory' and the only legitimate ways of being through the sometimes draconian policing of social practices. Regulatory measures work as 'an organising matrix' (Epstein and Johnson 1998 p. 99) to maintain the order and stability of space as straight. Hence, 'in "Western"

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<sup>3</sup> 'Discourse' is used here in its Foucauldian sense to refer to social and cultural structures of meaning and forms of power (Foucault 1973).

societies, the performance of same-sex intimacy remains socially proscribed in streets, parks, restaurants, workplaces, and shopping centres' (Gorman-Murray 2006 p. 146), with public displays of alternative (i.e. non-heterosexual and non-hegemonically heterosexual) behaviour being met with disapproval, withering looks, glances, whispers, comments made under the breath, stares, jeers, and even violence and aggression (Browne 2007).

These marginalising and repressive measures exert much pressure on people to adhere to the 'prescribed script' (Rich 1987 p. 64) of compulsory heterosexuality and become socialised into heteronormative ways of being. Considering the consequences of being identified as non-heterosexual, it is unsurprising that many gay people internalise the regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality and are highly self-conscious and self-vigilant with regard to expressing (or not expressing) their sexuality (Brickell 2000; Kitchin 2002; Mason 2001). Gill Valentine has been particularly prolific in detailing the ways in which alternative sexualities negotiate spaces saturated with heterosexist norms and assumptions (1993a; 1993b; 1996; 2001). She reports how gay people often take care not to exhibit signs of their non-heterosexuality and / or attempt to pass as straight in public, for fear of the possible negative reprisals and social costs of their 'true' sexuality being noticed in these settings. Thus, the heterosexualisation of space can be accomplished both overtly through public displays of disapproval, threats and violence, and also through gay people monitoring, adapting and censoring their own behaviour.

Such is the invisibility of the heterosexual matrix and the often unthinking repetition of heterosexual ways of being, that the assumption of space being inherently, 'naturally' or 'authentically' straight is pervasive and taken for granted (Duncan 1996a; Valentine 1996). It is 'so deeply ingrained in Western culture that it is not even seen' (Myslik 1996 p. 159), and 'often passes unaccredited and without criticism' (Mellor and Epstein 2006 p. 381). However, the constructed nature of space as straight, and the work which is required to continually reinscribe and safeguard the heterosexual matrix, are readily apparent to those who cannot or choose not to adhere to the norms, assumptions and expectations of this discourse (Valentine 1996). Alternative sexualities here parallel the figure of the clown in Medieval carnival (Bakhtin 1984), with their positioning on the margins of society and status as 'outsiders' allowing them critical distance to reflect on what they observe and a privileged insight into how things 'really are'.

Following this work on human geography and sexuality, the focus of this thesis is on how gay students negotiate the ‘threateningly straight’ (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 138) spaces and the ‘thundering (hetero)normative expectations’ (ibid. p. 102) of university where, by default of their non-heterosexuality, they are positioned as ‘Other’ and outside sanctioned ways of being. In other words, I want to see how my participants ‘work within the confines of power and normativity’ (Oswin 2008 p. 96) of higher education.

### *A note on terminology*

As language around sexuality is heavily loaded and carries much ‘baggage’ and connotational meanings, it is important I explain my choice of terminology in this thesis. In this section I discuss how I describe my participants and their gayness, and also present myself, in the text.

It has been argued that writing in a detached, depersonalised way ‘creates the impression that investigators dealt with their participants in a hierarchical, manipulative fashion, even if the reality behind the reports was otherwise’ (Walsh-Bowers and Parlour 1992 p. 95) and ‘signifies a hierarchical relationship of researcher domination and participant subordination’ (ibid. pp. 104-105). I have therefore made a concerted effort to produce ‘humanised report-writing’ (ibid. p. 109), particularly when addressing the people who took part in the study.

There are many words to describe someone who is physically attracted to the same sex, and so I gave much consideration to how to label my participants in this thesis. Having been used as a name for a mental illness, ‘*homosexual*’ retains clinical and pathological connotations, being ‘laden with medicalised and normalizing meanings’ (Pascoe 2007 p. 343). I discounted ‘*queer*’ as a descriptive term because it is often used to encompass a diversity of non-heterosexualities (Niles 2004), and ‘a vague way of referring to “lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, etc.”’ (Hogan and Hudson 1998 p. 464). I was also uncomfortable with how it so firmly positions groups as ‘Other’, and its aggressive and provocative leanings. Therefore, most often I use the word ‘*gay*’ to describe my participants as it does not carry these implications of same-sex desire being a ‘scientific’ irregularity or a deviance from psychiatric, psychological, social or cultural definitions of what is deemed to be ‘normal’. However, I do

occasionally substitute it with '*homosexual*' / '*homosexuality*' for grammatical reasons, such as to avoid any repetition of 'gay' in a sentence.

Originally, I referred to my participants' '*sexual orientation*' as the term's reductionist implications closely mirrored their frequent and often strong assertions that being gay meant little (if anything) other than they found men sexually desirable instead of women<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to these claims, analysis of participants' data indicated that this part of their identity actually did 'bleed' into other aspects of their university lives – indeed, it is these intersections which are the focus of this work. Therefore, in the thesis I primarily refer to my participants' '*sexuality*' (although I do sometimes use the word '*gayness*' instead for the grammatical reasons stated above), as this term indicates that it can permeate and influence their student experiences in ways other than simply gender attraction.

## **Section 2. 'Autobiography of the question'**

As I detail in Chapter 3, throughout the undertaking of this research I have aligned myself with feminist epistemology. Tropes which have challenged and critiqued the 'ongoing power of the myth of the researcher as detached and objective' (Cullen et al. 2002 p. 382) – also referred to as 'false notion of scientific objectivity' (Okely 1996 p. 27) and 'false neutrality' (Valentine 1998a p. 306) - spoke to me. I find the positivist assumption of an impartial science unbiased and unprejudiced by researcher association problematic, for 'clearly, who we are and what we believe in affects our research and we cannot put ourselves in suspension in the pursuit of so-called objectivity' (James and Platzer 1999 p. 78). Therefore, having sketched the theoretical foundations of the study, it is imperative to now make explicit, and thus own, where I am coming from as researcher. As such, I move from the theoretical and pragmatic to the reflexive, and present my 'autobiography of the question' (Miller 1995 p. 22).

Making the lens through which I approached this study visible by describing how I positioned myself in relation to the questions, aims and objectives of the research, enables the study to be contextualized. It also allows informed and considered judgments as to the validity and robustness of the entire project to be made, for 'to

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<sup>4</sup> These claims, and the discursive strategies participants utilised to downplay the significance of their sexuality in their everyday lives as gay students, are discussed and deconstructed in Chapter 4.

know how researchers construe the shape of the social world and how they mean to give us a credible account of it is to know just who we have on the other side of the table' (Huberman and Miles 1994 p. 429). However, I do acknowledge cautions that reflexivity 'should not mean that we become so self-obsessed that we pour our reflections, unchecked, into the pages of research reports' (James and Platzer 1999 p. 77), and therefore try to be brief.

The seeds of this topic were sown in 1997 when deciding what to study for my undergraduate dissertation in psychology. I had no clear idea of the area I wanted to research, let alone any aims, objectives or questions. My tutor, Ian Rivers, listened patiently to a few half-hearted suggestions, and then asked if I would be interested in conducting a comparative study to one currently being undertaken in the United States on the experiences of LGB<sup>5</sup> students living in halls of residence. A year earlier I had come out to him when seeking support regarding my sexuality, knowing that he would be understanding and sympathetic because of his extensive research on gay youth, and I believe this disclosure informed his suggestion as to why this particular research project might interest me. Initially I was wary of accepting, being uncomfortable with the thought of academically addressing issues I had had difficulty addressing in my personal life. Also, as researchers are often (and often correctly) assumed to have a heavy self-interest and investment in the topics they study (Fisher 1989; Okami 2002), I was concerned over the suspicions that undertaking this project would cast on my own sexual identity, for at that time I had only told a few close friends that I was gay.

However, Ian tantalisingly predicted that as the experiences of LGB students living in halls at a UK university had not been substantively researched, this work could very well result in publications, conference presentations, and academic fame and acclaim. It was for these reasons of self-interest, together with the fact that I did not have any other workable research projects, that I decided to undertake the study, and not because of any activist desires or burning need to address my gayness in an academic way. Nevertheless, this project did facilitate a shift of my interest in sexuality from the personal to the theoretical, for being introduced to literature and research on gayness (and specifically on gay students) opened my eyes to an academic niche I could foresee

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<sup>5</sup> Lesbian, gay and bisexual.



myself comfortably contributing to. The resultant work on the experiences of LGB students living in halls of residence did indeed result in two publications (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999), and these were instrumental in securing me places on my MA, MSc and PhD courses.

These roller-coaster four years as an undergraduate student, during which I gradually changed from being timid, shy and closeted to being at ease with my sexuality and living out my gayness to the full, were physically, mentally and emotionally draining – albeit a time I still remember fondly. I therefore purposefully retreated back into the closet and did not academically address issues of sexuality when following my MA degree in Social Research Methods. The exception was a ten week course entitled Sociology of Sexuality: Lesbian and Gay Studies, which I attended primarily because it was taught by Ken Plummer who, because of his work on sexualities, I was curious to meet.

After the successful completion of this MA I left university for an enjoyable number of years out in the ‘real world’, working in the marketing department of a mail order clothing company. However, the pull of academia remained strong, and having exhausted the promotional possibilities in my department I decided the time was right to return to university and undertake a PhD. A cursory search of the literature indicated that gay students’ experiences at UK universities remained under-researched, and I thought that by building upon my previous project I could make a worthwhile academic contribution to this topic. Therefore, with my supervisors’ guidance, I conceived of an MSc study on gay students’ lives within higher education (published as Taulke-Johnson 2008), which acted as a pilot and precursor to this PhD research.

This thesis is thus a continuation of my previous work on gay students in that it focuses on the same population and their university lives. However, its larger sample means a greater number of narratives and stories have been collected and analysed, and it is more nuanced, theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous and analytically sophisticated than the earlier projects. Also, it reflects upon *how* participants (re)presented, (re)constructed, framed and made sense of their experiences, rather than simply cataloguing, describing and detailing what these actually are. Thus, this research represents both an investigative extension of, and academic advancement on, my

previous studies.

My publications also map the quite dramatic changes in my thinking and positioning as researcher following the shifts in my academic career as recounted above (and elaborated upon in Chapter 3). In my early papers (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999) I focused almost exclusively on the problems and negative experiences of being a gay student, reporting participants' uncertainties and anxieties regarding coming out, the less-than-positive reactions to such disclosures, incidents of flatmates spraying obscenities in shaving foam on their doors and windows, and perceptions that there was little support or assistance from the university authorities. I therefore followed the common practice in academic literature, which is detailed and critiqued in the next chapter, of representing gay people only as fearful, victimised and pathologised.

However, this PhD study and preceding MSc project present more noticeably balanced and nuanced accounts of gay students' lives. For example, in my MSc study I argued that gay students' counter-narratives should be acknowledged and addressed to obtain a richer and more comprehensive description and understanding of their university experiences. The differences between my earlier and this later work can be attributed to a number of factors, including my move from undergraduate to postgraduate student and corresponding increased skills and sensitivity as researcher, and also my reading of Eric Rofes' (2004) critique of the ubiquitous practice of defining this population solely as martyrs-targets-victims - a paradigm that has informed much LGB research and social policy, and which is discussed in detail in the following chapter. Nevertheless, it was the difficulties I had in mapping and reconciling my own experiences as a gay student to the pervasive reports of harassment and suffering which primarily prompted my interest in alternative (i.e. non-victimised) narratives. This is not to say that I purposefully sought to 'unearth' positive stories in participants' data, nor that I deliberately ignored or downplayed any negative accounts. Rather, I was determined in this PhD study to thoroughly and critically engage with my participants' accounts in all their richness, nuance, tension, messiness and contradiction, and not position gay students within oversimplified victimised / non-victimised binaries.

### **Section 3. Research questions, and thesis structure and contents**

As indicated by my research questions stated below, the focus of this study is on how participants' (non-hetero)sexuality influences and mediates their lives in higher education, and also the ways in which they negotiate and experience university space as gay students.

- In what ways does the (non-hetero)sexuality of gay male undergraduate students intersect with their lives within higher education?
- What importance and significance do these students ascribe their sexuality in influencing, impacting upon and shaping their university experiences?
- What are the experiences of these students at university, and how do they frame, relate, make sense and make meaning of these?
- What practices and strategies do these students employ in 'doing gay' (i.e. expressing, negotiating and managing their sexuality) at university?

In Chapter 2, 'Campus Climates for Gay Students', I contextualize this study by detailing how the murder of Matthew Shepard has become the dominant story of the gay student experience, as reflected in the academic literature's focus on heterosexism, homophobia, harassment, assault and victimization within university. I also argue that alternative accounts of gay student life are typically ignored and not acknowledged, and that this practice restricts wider understanding of and insight into these people's lives and experiences. Although I begin to explore the relevant literature, the integration of theory with data is built throughout the thesis, with further literature discussed in each subsequent chapter.

In Chapter 3, 'Researching the Gay Student Experience', I detail the recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures of this study, and make clear the rationale for my methodological choices. I also reflect on some of the issues I encountered and experienced as particularly meaningful during the research process. This chapter therefore forms the basis upon which the integrity, rigour and credibility of each of my assertions, arguments and conclusions can be evaluated.

The findings of the research are then discussed in the following chapters. In **Chapter 4, ‘“Rainbow-Hugging Queens”: Dramatis Personae, and Role of Sexuality’**, I situate my participants’ data by presenting their penpictures (i.e. self-descriptions). I then interrogate their assertions of how (un)important and (non-)influential their sexuality was in their everyday lives as gay students at university, and deconstruct the discursive strategies they employed when claiming that their gayness was only a minor and insignificant part of themselves. This downplaying, de-centralising and dismissing of sexuality in participants’ gay student biographies is a recurring theme throughout the thesis.

The intersections of participants’ sexuality and their higher education experiences are then detailed and deconstructed in chapters 5 to 8. In **Chapter 5, ‘Queer Decisions? Gay Male Students’ University Choices’**, I argue that one of the ways in which participants’ gayness influenced their university experience was the part it played in their decisions about which institutions to attend / not to attend. I focus on geographies and journeys, as participants wanted to migrate away from home communities they experienced as heterosexist, homophobic and therefore repressive, and sought to move towards places where they perceived they could more freely address their sexuality.

In **Chapter 6, ‘Assertion, Regulation and Consent: Gay Students, Straight Flatmates, and the (Hetero)Sexualisation of University Accommodation Space’**, I examine the ways in which participants’ gayness influenced and mediated their relationships with their flatmates. I explore how student accommodation space was constructed, maintained and regulated as dominantly straight by the practices of both flatmates and participants. I also argue that gay students have to be highly sensitive and aware when addressing and negotiating their sexuality with the people they live with at university.

The following two chapters each address a different way that participants ‘did gay’ at university – verbally and performatively. In **Chapter 7, ‘“I haven’t got the Sob Story that some People Have”: Gay Male Students’ Contemporary Coming Out Narratives’**, I detail participants’ disclosure narratives and experiences. I highlight the ways in which these stories do not map on to ‘traditional’ coming out accounts of feelings of having to tell people, heightened anxiety over how they will react, making

disclosures through declarative statements, and responses of rejection, harassment and victimization. I propose that social and cultural changes may account for my participants' 'new' coming out stories, and argue for the acknowledgment of these contemporary, alternative disclosure narratives.

Participants' bodily performance in university space is addressed in **Chapter 8, “*I’ll be Myself Wherever I Go*”: Gay Performativity and Visibility in University Space**, and particularly how they regulated their behaviour according to the shifting temporal and spatial nature of these environments. I explore participants' awareness of the regulatory mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality operating in higher education settings, and how they sometimes deliberately ignored these by transgressing and troubling 'straight space'.

In **Chapter 9, ‘Conclusion: Living Differently’**, I reiterate the study's substantive findings and relate them to the research questions, suggest how the work might be built upon to further understanding of gay students' lives within higher education, and position my participants' accounts of their university experiences against dominant stories (as detailed in Chapter 2).

Although this thesis covers a wide and disparate range of topics, it does not purport to be an exhaustive examination or analysis of my participants' university experiences. Space restrictions prevent the inclusion of discussions on, for example, their thoughts on living and studying at the parental home, living with another gay flatmate, the (non)influence of sexuality on their academic work, their perceptions of and involvement in the student LGBT<sup>6</sup> Society and the gay scene, and their negotiation of same-sex relationships at university. However, as I detail in Chapter 3 when discussing the study's methodology, I did have criteria by which subjects were selected for inclusion in the thesis – primarily that they were the most relevant and appropriate to address and answer my research questions. The considerable shelf life of qualitative data means that the work that has not found a place in this final version may still be used elsewhere.

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<sup>6</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

*Going forward*

In this Introduction I have defined the conceptual framework of the research, explained my choice of terminology, detailed how I am approaching this study through relating my autobiography of the question, stated my research questions and mapped out the structure and contents of the thesis. Therefore, this chapter has provided a concise overview of the theoretical, linguistic, reflexive and contextual foundations of the study. Many of the points that have been raised here are elaborated upon in the following eight chapters of the thesis. They assist in answering whether these participants did indeed 'live differently' in offering new and alternative stories of the gay student experience to those of harassment, victimisation, heterosexism and homophobia which are typically reported in the academic literature - and which are reviewed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### CAMPUS CLIMATES FOR GAY STUDENTS

I am just watching *The Matthew Shepard Story*, and I have seen this in the past, and it still touches my heart each and everytime. I still cannot watch the beginning of it when it shows what happened to Matthew, it just absolutely breaks my heart. Such a tragedy, for a young beautiful man. (posted by Kim on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

Matthew, just wanted tell you how much I would have enjoyed knowing you, and that you are in my thoughts often. Maybe when the time comes, we will get the chance to finally get to meet in person, and I can tell you how much you have inspired in my life. I guess that sounds silly, now that I say it, cause I'm sure you already know. (posted by DJTrance on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

(Entries in the guestbook of *Matthew's Place – A Program of the Matthew Shepard Foundation* website<sup>7</sup>)

Matthew Shepard, a 21 year old gay student at the University of Wyoming, Laramie (US), died from injuries sustained from a reportedly homophobic attack in October 1998. He was driven to a remote rural area and then robbed, beaten, pistol whipped and left tied to a fence in near-freezing temperatures. When he was discovered eighteen hours later, Shepard was in a coma and suffering from hypothermia. Such were the extent of his injuries that doctors were unable to operate. Shepard remained on full life support until he died five days after his admission to hospital. I begin this chapter with an account of the Matthew Shepard murder because, as detailed in the following sections of this chapter and illustrated by the guestbook entries cited throughout, it is a dominant narrative not only for gay people's (both students and non-students) self-identification, but also for how others perceive and define this population.

In Section 1 I interrogate how Shepard's killing has attained iconic status as one of *the* defining stories of the gay student population, and is positioned as the most extreme example of hostility and hatred they can encounter at university. In Section 2 I contextualise my study by locating it within a critique of the body of research on gay

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<sup>7</sup> All the guestbook entries reported in this chapter are taken from this website (<http://www.matthewshepard.org>), and are copied verbatim to retain the writers' original intent.

students, which implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) draws upon Shepard's murder to pathologise and give them inevitable and seemingly unshakeable 'wounded identities' (Rasmussen 2004c p. 445). In Section 3 I detail some of the alternative and atypical (i.e. positive) narratives of this population, and argue that not looking beyond what Rofes (2004) terms a 'martyr-target-victim' framework (p. 41) is limiting and restrictive. I do not question the appropriateness or relevance of the framework itself, but rather its ubiquity which has resulted in narrowly-focussed work which rarely addresses affirming or empowering aspects of the gay student experience. Throughout the chapter I refer to Williams' (1977) conceptualisation of dominant, emergent and residual social practices (as previously discussed in Chapter 1) as they map particularly well on to the different types of stories addressed here.

### **Section 1. Matthew Shepard as icon**

Matthew Shepard is (unfortunately) not the only victim of a gay hate crime. However, ascertaining why the names and stories of Jody Dobrowski, Jason Gage, Billy Jack Gaither, Sean William Kennedy, Danny Overstreet, Aaron Webster and Barry Winchell are less well-known and discussed, and why these incidents have not had the international, social, cultural, legal or political impact of Shepard's murder, would be a PhD study in itself. However, Shepard's youth, vulnerability (as conveyed by media reports of his small height [barely five foot tall] and slight frame [105 pounds]) and the brutality of the attack may have all played a part in distinguishing his assault. Furthermore, the oft-cited accounts that the person who found him initially thought he was a scarecrow, and that his face was covered in blood except for where it had been washed away by his tears, have lent the murder a mythic quality, and repositioned Matthew Shepard from 'mere' victim of gay hate crime to celebrity, idol and icon – a status maintained after 11 years<sup>8</sup>.

Such resonance began following Shepard's admission to Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, when news of his attack first began to circulate. Rulon Stacey, the institution's Chief Executive Officer, reported that in the 24 hours following Shepard's

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<sup>8</sup> Parallels can be drawn between public reaction to this incident, and the deaths of Princess Diana (e.g. Kear and Steinberg 1999) and – most recently – Michael Jackson. However, the reasons for such emotive responses to these events, and their social, cultural and/or political impacts, probably are very different.



arrival the hospital had received almost 2,000 e-mails and a dramatic increase in website hits (CNN 1998). Every mainstream US television channel and network provided regular updates on Shepard's medical condition, and candlelight vigils were held across the country - including at the university he attended<sup>9</sup>.

Instead of fading from public consciousness after the trial of Shepard's two assailants (and their sentences of two life terms each), and Shepard's death and funeral, the incident continued to be discussed and debated in both the media and the public arena. His memorial service was hosted by the out-lesbian US actress and TV personality Ellen DeGeneres; rallies and concerts were held across the US with appearances by Barbra Streisand and Elton John; the fence where Shepard was tied became a pilgrimage site and its owner eventually had to remove it because of the vast number of people who came to pay their respects (Kaufman 2007); Shepard's face appeared on the front covers of the major US publications *Time* and *Newsweek*; and three major American films relating the incident were released (*The Laramie Project*, *The Matthew Shepard Story* and *Anatomy of a Hate Crime*).

Books addressing the murder include Beth Loffreda's (2000) *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder* which details the effects of and reactions to the incident by the student body at Shepard's university and the local town; Moises Kaufman's (2001) *The Laramie Project* which was conceived as a play based on interviews with people both directly and indirectly involved in the police investigation; and Romaine Patterson's (Patterson and Hinds 2005) *The Whole World was Watching: Living in the Light of Matthew Shepard*, which presents a highly personal account of the crime and its aftermath.

It would be most interesting to analyse the numerous entries that are posted daily in the guestbooks and forums of the many websites devoted to Shepard (such as those comments which opened this chapter), and tease out the discourses they commonly draw upon of perceived self-identification, companionship, friendship and martyrdom.

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<sup>9</sup> The University of Wyoming maintains a *Matthew Shepard Resource Site* on its webpages (<http://www.uwyo.edu/news/shepard/>).

We Miss You Matthew! As a fellow member of the LGBT community, I'm proud to be able to call you one of my own☺ Not a day goes by when you're not thought of! As always, you and your family are in my thoughts and prayers! Keep the party in heaven going until the rest of us get there ☺ (posted by Shane on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2008)

I wanna say thank you so much for sharing Matthew's story and life with the world it has helped me cope with the fact that not everyone is gonna except me for being bisexual but it has also helped me realize that some people will....your son is my hero and even though I didn't know him I will meet him one day!!! AND I WILL HUG HIM AND THANK HIM!!! Much Love ☺ (posted by Sheena Oliver on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2008)

A review of entries on these webpages indicates that just as some LGBs may align and identify themselves with Shepard, so some straight people see him as being representative of all non-heterosexuals (as detailed below). This assumption is also noted by Rofes (2004), who related how one of his non-gay students e-mailed him after watching two television programmes on the murder stating 'This helped me understand what it must be like to be a gay teenager' (p. 43).

I AM VERY INSPIRED BY THE MATTHEW SHEPARD STORY AND I AM A VERY STRONG ADVOCATE FOR GAY RIGHTS EVEN THO IM NOT GAY IM STRAIGHT BUT I DONT DISCRIMINATE I WATCHED THE LARAMIE PROJECT IN SCHOOL LAST WEEK AND HYSTERICALLY CRIED MATTHEW WAS SOOOO CUTE HOW CAN U KILL HIM BECAUSE HES GAY (posted by Alaina Ables on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2008)

This past month of February and beginning of March I have been doing a HUGE research paper on Matthew's story and I don't think I've ever cried so hard for someone I never knew. In English class while reading about the Matthew Shepard Act I started crying and nobody knew why. this story touched me so much because my best friend is gay and if something ever happened to him I would just lose it. (posted by Amber Roush on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2008)

As illustrated by these guestbook entries, and particularly the last one where the writer expresses her concern that her gay friend could (and perhaps is expected to) encounter similar victimisation and violence, the Matthew Shepard murder is a dominant story of the gay student experience. Both the gay and non-gay people reported above equate non-

heterosexuality with likely non-acceptance, suffering and hurt. As I detail in the next section of this chapter, the pervasiveness of this particular type of story is also reflected in the academic literature on gay students.

## **Section 2. Academic work on gay students**

Reviews of published campus climate studies for GLBT<sup>10</sup> students universally indicate that these students experience discrimination, harassment, and fear and that the campus climate for them is chilly at best. (Brown et al. 2004 p. 8)

There is a substantive literature detailing and examining the experiences of LGB university students (e.g. Brown et al. 2004; Evans 2001; Eyermann and Sanlo 2002; Garber 2002). This body of work is considerable and should be lauded, particularly as only ten years ago it was stated 'little is known about the campus lives of gay students' (Rhoads 1997a p. 276) and that this 'lack of knowledge of collegiate experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students forms a significant gap in the higher education literature' (Rhoads 1997b p. 460). However, as indicated by Brown et al. (2004), above, the majority of studies on LGB students are firmly centred on their negative experiences at university. Although I look at different types of accounts in Section 3 of this chapter, here I focus on these victim narratives which constitute the majority of work and dominant stories on the population. Some of these studies even explicitly identify and position the Matthew Shepard murder as an exemplary and stark warning of the extent of hostility, hatred and homophobia that gay students may encounter in higher education (e.g. Bowen and Bourgeois 2001; Yep 2002).

Although instances of violence are rare, the attitudes that may lead to violence resonate through the everyday experiences of many students in higher education and found their most appalling expression in the horrific murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998. (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 124)

Certainly the murder of the University of Wyoming gay student, Matthew Shepard, underscores just how dangerous the [campus] environment can be for students who choose to disclose their sexual identity. (Evans and Broido 1999 p. 666)

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<sup>10</sup> Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

The term 'climate' has been widely adopted when assessing the university environment for LGB students, and has been defined as:

The cumulative attitudes, behaviours, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential. (Rankin 2005 p. 17)

Campus climates may be described as warm, supportive and accepting. However, the majority of studies report that gay students experience these environments as hostile and unwelcoming<sup>11</sup> (e.g. Evans 2001, 2002; Evans and Broido 2002; Ritchie and Banning 2001), with 'the college campus remains uninviting, at best, and treacherous, at worst, terrain for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students' (Draughn et al. 2002 p. 10). Older studies have reported that 'harassment, both verbal and physical, remains a fact of life for many gay and lesbian students' (Malaney et al. 1997 p. 366), 'homophobic and heterosexist elements of societal culture pervade the campus' (Love 1998 p. 311), and that gay students are often fearful at university (D'Augelli 1989a, b; Eliason 1996). Such assertions are reiterated in more recent work detailing that gay students are concerned for their safety on campus (Eddy and Forney 2000), and perceive the climates of these environments as less supportive than their heterosexual peers (Brown et al. 2004). Indeed, 'the research from the past two decades demonstrates that college campuses have been inhospitable, and even hostile, toward their LGB members' (Rankin 2005 p. 20).

Numerous studies have reported pervasive and widespread negative attitudes towards homosexuality in UK and US colleges and universities, with earlier research even indicating that 'homophobic attitudes among freshmen may be so common as to be normative' (D'Augelli and Rose 1990 p. 490). In addition, this anti-gay sentiment was seen to extend beyond sexuality as an abstract concept and the LGB population in general, to include negative attitudes towards gay peers at university. For example, in

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<sup>11</sup> Fassinger (1991) alternatively classifies college spaces as open, hostile or null to gay students. Open environments actively encourage discussion on issues relating to sexuality, hostile environments promote and tolerate homophobia and heterosexism, and null environments are neither gay-positive nor gay-negative. As null environments do not challenge anti-gay sentiment and behaviour, or communicate support of non-heterosexualities, Fassinger proposes that gay students may perceive and experience these types of campus as similar to hostile settings.

one study nearly 30% of 218 (presumably-heterosexual) first year undergraduate participants indicated they would ‘prefer a college environment with only heterosexuals’, and almost half ‘considered gay men disgusting’ and ‘believed that homosexual activity is wrong’ (D’Augelli and Rose 1990 p. 490). These findings strongly supported the assertion that lesbian and gay students face ‘intense negative prejudicial attitudes’ on campus (Engstrom and Sedlacek 1997 p. 572), which more recent studies have echoed (Eddy and Forney 2000; Engberg et al. 2007; Holley et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2002).

Much research has sought to identify predictors of LGB attitudes and levels of (in)tolerance (Hicks and Lee 2006; Mohr and Sedlacek 2000), often utilising one of the large battery of quantitative tools constructed to measure self-reported opinions towards non-heterosexuality and LGB people<sup>12</sup>. Briefly, these correlates have included personal characteristics, moral orientation, amount of contact with gay people, and educational factors. For example, male students are significantly more likely than female students to report negative and intolerant attitudes towards lesbians and gay men (Brown et al. 2004; Liang and Alimo 2005); people who align themselves with the view that homosexuality is learned or a choice report less tolerance to gays than those who believe same-sex attraction to be biological, innate or genetic (Hewitt and Moore 2003); those who score highly on measures of religiosity also do so on measures of homophobia, heterosexism and disapproval of LGB people (Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002; Snively et al. 2004); students who know an LGB person report more pro-gay attitudes than those who do not (Cullen et al. 2002); and students enrolled on arts and ‘soft’ (i.e. social) science courses such as psychology report more positive attitudes towards homosexuality than those in the ‘hard’ sciences or business (Brown et al. 2004).

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<sup>12</sup> These include the Riddle Homophobia Scale (Evans and Wall 1991), the Homonegativity Scale (Morrison et al. 1999), the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLGM) Scale (Herek 1988), the Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Scale (Millham et al. 1976), the Heterosexual Attitudes Toward Homosexual (HATH) Scale (Larsen et al. 1980), the Index of Attitudes Toward Homosexuals (IAH) / Index of Homophobia (IHP) (Hudson and Ricketts 1980), the Homophobic Scale (Smith 1971), the Homosexism Scale (Hansen 1982), the Kite Homosexuality Attitude Scale (Kite and Deaux 1986), the Homophobia Scale (Bouton et al. 1987), the Political Correctness - Sexual Orientation (PC-SO) Scale (Brittan-Powell et al. 1999), and the Support for Lesbian and Gay Human Rights Scale (SLGHR) (Ellis et al. 2002). As results are derived from self-reports of non-affective reactions to hypothetical situations, these tools are vulnerable to criticisms of fostering socially desirable responses (Korfhage 2006). Also, they provide little (if any) information on the specific situations that may trigger feelings of prejudice towards LGB people (Engstrom and Sedlacek 1997).

It is important to gauge anti-gay sentiment because negative attitudes may become manifest in actual behaviour (Bernat et al. 2001; Schope and Eliason 2000; Whitley 2001). In fact, it has been proposed that gay students are harassed more frequently than non-gay students (Bieschke et al. 2000) - even as much as four times more (Sanlo 2004). Just as homophobia is expressed through rudeness, verbal threats, intimidation and physical aggression (Franklin 2000; Schope and Eliason 2000), so there are many reports of gay students being targeted for both direct and indirect harassment and assault at university because of their sexuality (Bieschke et al. 2000; Brown et al. 2004). These incidents include seeing anti-gay graffiti and also signs and posters relating to gay issues torn down and vandalised, hearing derogatory comments such as 'hey faggot' and 'bash them back into the closet' (Lopez and Chism 1993 p. 99), being socially isolated and made the subject of rumours and gossip, and receiving hateful anti-gay letters (Gortmaker and Brown 2006; Stevens 2004). Gay students have also reported physical victimization, including being followed, chased, punched, kicked, having objects thrown at them, and assaulted with weapons (Cramer 2002; Eddy and Forney 2000).

Furthermore, the detrimental effects that this victimisation and harassment may have on the psychological, social, physical and academic functioning of gay students have been well documented (e.g. Burn et al. 2005; Moradi et al. 2006). These include depression and post-traumatic stress, sleep problems and nightmares, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, decreases in self-esteem, internalised homophobia and suicide ideation (Dworkin 2000; Garofalo 2001; Murray 2001). As such, these students are deemed to be particularly 'at risk' of non-completion of their degrees (Prince 1995; Sherrill and Hardesty 1994).

Early investigations of the extent of this campus homophobia include Rhoads' (1997a) two year ethnography of 40 gay and bisexual male college students at a single US university. Here it was reported that 'nearly every student had some story to tell about being harassed' (p. 282). D'Augelli (1989b; 1992) also concluded that many LGB students in the US are concerned for their physical safety on campus, with approximately 75% having experienced verbal harassment (50% reporting two or more incidents), 26% having been physically threatened with violence, 22% having been chased, 17% having had property destroyed, and 5% having been spat at. He also stated that almost all LGB students in the US expect and anticipate some form of harassment during their time at university because of their sexuality (D'Augelli and Rose 1990).

Such reports indicate that the hetero-normative assumptions and attitudes that are embedded within and taught by the 'hidden curriculum' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 107) of schools are seemingly reinscribed in higher education.

More extensive and recent studies, such as Rankin's (2003) national survey of over one and a half thousand LGBTs (undergraduates, postgraduates, faculty and administrative staff) on 14 US campuses, have reported similar findings. 36% of this sample reported experiencing harassment of some kind within the past year, which included derogatory remarks (89%), verbal harassment and threats (48%), anti-gay graffiti (39%), written comments (33%) and physical assault. 20% stated they were fearful of their physical safety because of their sexuality, 60% hid their gayness to avoid harassment and victimisation, and 74% viewed their campus climate as homophobic. Such statistics indicate that 'harassment, intimidation, and fear of physical attack continue to be the norm for members of the LGB college community' (Engberg et al. 2007 p. 52).

Whilst there is some work on the experiences of gay students in the UK, it too is problematic in being, like the literature reported above, almost exclusively centred around homophobia. For example, David Telford in Epstein et al. (2003) notes the incidents of harassment and victimisation his gay student participants experienced because of their sexuality. These include being verbally taunted and abused by flatmates to the extent of moving out of halls of residence into different accommodation, and not disclosing gayness at university for fear of negative reactions from peers.

My 2008 study moved away from these victim narratives, and so I discuss it in the next section of this chapter on alternative stories of the gay student experience. However, in my earlier publications (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999) I asserted that my research 'does mirror the findings from other studies conducted in the US suggesting that university campus life in the UK is not free from an intolerance toward homosexuality' (Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999 p. 86). These papers were derived from a small-scale qualitative study examining the experiences of 12 undergraduate LGB students (7 gay male, 3 lesbians, 1 bisexual male, 1 bisexual female) living in university halls of residence<sup>13</sup>. In both articles I located LGB students

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<sup>13</sup> This was the study undertaken for my undergraduate psychology degree, as suggested by Ian Rivers and discussed in the autobiography of the question section of the previous chapter.

within a victimised framework, with one of the abstracts noting ‘the challenges they have faced integrating into the university culture because of their sexual orientation’ and ‘the dilemmas they face as they move away from home for the first time’ (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 14). I also reported the short- and long-term psychosocial impairments this population is ‘particularly prone to’ (Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999 p. 74), and catalogued incidents of participants hearing derogatory jokes about LGB people and issues, seeing signs for LGB events torn down and defaced, and recounting flatmates’ homo-negative behaviour.

When you come into my flat it’s like ‘So who’ve you shagged today then?’ ... ‘What’s it like having it up the shitbox?’ ... I’ve had foam sprayed on my door saying ‘Hello Gay Boy’ ... and something sprayed on my window – ‘Gay Boy lives here’.  
(gay male, 20) (Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999 p. 82)

However, some participants also related positive experiences of being an LGB student at university, reporting peer support and encouragement when coming out, heterosexual students speaking out for and defending LGB people and issues, and other straight students backing and attending the monthly gay disco in the Students’ Union. Nevertheless, these episodes were discounted and dismissed with the statement they ‘were few and were outnumbered by experiences of indifference and intolerance’ (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 21). I also repositioned these participants in a victimized framework in the studies’ conclusions, asserting that LGB students ‘often experience at least a degree of difficulty in integrating with peers because of the prevalence of negative social attitudes surrounding homosexuality’ (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 22), and arguing that assumptions of university being a ‘melting pot’ fostering a culture that is embracing and supporting of diversity and difference ‘appears to be less than accurate’ (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 16).

These practices of barely acknowledging and glossing over gay people’s positive, affirming and empowering incidents, and swiftly reiterating the negative, are apparent in other studies – e.g. ‘While many young people who “come out” have positive experiences, it is also commonplace for children to be rejected and to face bullying and victimization from their peers’ (Valentine et al. 2001 p. 120), and ‘Although such visibility [of LGB people] has positive effects such as identification with lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities, another consequence of this increased openness is verbal and



physical victimisation' (Waldo et al. 1998 p. 308). In addition, James and Platzer (1999) include only a three line quotation of how a lesbian participant felt comfortable, safe and secure with her sexual identity, and immediately follow it with the statement 'However, it was rare to hear such comments. More often people expressed anxiety, feeling uncomfortable and unsafe, and fearing hostility and even physical harm' (p. 75). Thus, when positive accounts, incidents and experiences are noted, they are not afforded the same attention as negative episodes, and tend to be disregarded, explained, or treated as anomalies.

This section has demonstrated that the assumption that all gay students face victimisation at university is strongly asserted and prevalent in academic literature. The stories related in this body of research are characterised by fearfulness, intolerance, harassment and assault, with only infrequent and dismissed deviations from these dominant narratives. I address these small fissures in hegemonic, negative conceptualisations of the gay student experience in the following section.

### Section 3. Alternative stories

I told my housemates what the study was about and they immediately said but you're probably not what he's looking for. (Harry)

The ubiquitousness of the victim narrative detailed above was also reflected in some of my participants' assumptions that their stories would be of little interest to me as they did not map on to these dominant tales. Just as Harry (above) pointed to the assumption that a student studying gay issues must have an activist or political agenda to explore and expose negativity and homophobia within higher education, so Will stated that his university experience was '*not what you wanted to hear*'. In positioning their non-victimised accounts as uninteresting and unimportant, these participants framed the negative story as the only legitimate tale of the gay student experience.

A review of the academic research on gay students reiterates this assumption that these are the only narratives worth telling, as they are the only ones given voice. Even though 'the non-heterosexual world ... [has] a long and vibrant history' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. vi), and 'the LGBT world is increasingly diverse and complex, and there are many

different stories that could be told' (Weeks 2007 p. 146), little is known of gay people (and particularly of gay students) apart from their difficulties, struggles, problems and hardships. As has been detailed in Section 2 of this chapter, research 'persistently present[s] [gay people] as always and in all ways, at risk and suffering' (Rasmussen and Crowley 2004 p. 429), as 'weak' and 'emasculated' (Plummer 1999 p. 1, p. 3), and as 'isolated, and suicidal' (Talbert 2004 p. 118). Harwood (2004) summarises and critiques this body of work, stating, 'It appears that being young and queer seems to be all about woundedness: it means experiencing suffering, including the risk of suicide, increased drug use, homelessness and violence' (p. 467).

Mid-way through a discussion on the victimisation reported by gay and bisexual male student participants, Rhoads (1995) states 'the stories of harassment and discrimination seem endless' (p. 71). Similarly, in cataloguing the episodes of LGB hate crimes on campus reported by Slater (1993), Palmer (1996) does not finish her list - 'The incidents in question included not only physical assault but also arson, vandalism, and verbal threats, as well as students being chased or followed, being spat upon, *and so on*' (p. 268 emphasis added). Research on gay students thus almost unanimously supports and endorses the statement that they 'fear for their safety, keep their identities secret, experience harassment, and feel that their universities are unsupportive of LGB people' (Rankin 2005 p. 20). Such findings perpetuate the assumption that all gay people inevitably occupy a subject position of suffering, and furthermore that this is the only position they occupy. Not looking beyond homonegative accounts of gay student life, and a disengagement and seeming disinterest with alternative (i.e. non-victimised) discourses, has resulted in a substantive but narrow body of literature which provides only a particular and partial understanding of and insight into this population's university experiences.

The extract below is taken from Rofes' (2004) questioning of the ubiquitous practice, as detailed above, of locating and representing all gay people and their lives within what he terms a 'martyr-target-victim' framework (p. 41)<sup>14</sup>. Rofes' critique has strongly

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<sup>14</sup> It is unfortunate that this strand of Rofes' work appears not to have been taken up and advanced following his untimely death in 2007. Indeed, it was not even mentioned in his memoriam in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (see Barrett 2007).

influenced my study, encouraging my realisation that there are stories of the gay experience to be told other than harassment, persecution and homophobia.

I heard the first critical comment about the course materials during the sixth week, after I had shown a videotape on LGBT youth. This was the third videotape we'd seen, and, at the precise moment when the video focused upon a statement like 'Lesbian and gay youth are three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts', one of my students let out a snicker of sorts and I noted some tension in the room. (p. 46)

In this reflexive piece, Rofes relates his students' critical responses to the curriculum he had developed and delivered for a school course on gay and lesbian issues. As illustrated in both the above and following extracts, students' reactions took the form of challenges to the narrowness of the gay experience addressed in the course materials, which were organized around the negative.

One student had used a highlighter to identify the readings and videotapes on my syllabus that she felt captured a nonpathologised vision of LGBT youth: there were three items identified. She rightfully pointed out that the reader I had spent weeks preparing contained only stories that focused on the persecution of queer youth. 'Where is the joy?!!' she wrote on the syllabus before presenting it to me. 'Don't these people ever have fun?' (p. 47)

Such comments encouraged Rofes to critically examine some of the texts on gay youth he had referred to and included in his teaching. In deconstructing these he noted a focus almost exclusively on the negative experiences of gay life, identifying the prevalence of discourses of persecution, oppression and victimhood. In portraying gay youth as prone to suicide ideation, homophobia, HIV risk, homelessness and substance abuse, these texts mirrored the academic literature (detailed in Section 2 of this chapter) which pathologises gay students.

Rofes then relates how he had to reframe his course so that it was not centred around these negative aspects of the gay experience. However, he emphasizes that in doing so he was not questioning, challenging or discounting 'traditional narrative[s] of persecution and victimisation' (p. 51). Instead, he wonders 'whether it was possible to identify an alternative framework from which to discuss queer youth' (p. 47).

I wanted materials that took us beyond Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena<sup>15</sup>, and other LGBT youth who had become martyrs to the cause; texts that understood queer students not only as targets of bullying, sexual harassment, and classroom taunts; videos that captured teenagers as whole human beings, not narrow victims of their parents, teachers, or peers. (p. 47)

Rofes asked his students to suggest topics he could incorporate into his course syllabus to ‘create a richer, more textured portrait of queer youth, and one that sounded real to them’ (p. 52). Their recommendations of falling in love, romance, fun, sex, laughter, supportive parents, and succeeding rather than failing in education, did not fit the martyr-target-victim model. Allowing space for these other stories of the gay experience encourages broader and richer portrayals of the population, an argument I reiterate throughout this thesis.

Aside from Rofes, there have been only a handful of other challenges to and questioning of the ‘unproblematised’ (Harwood 2004 p. 467) practice of ascribing all gay people the subject position of victim. Rasmussen and Crowley (2004), for example, argue that ‘lesbian, gay, queer, intersex and transgender subjectivities, identities and identifications must no longer be designated as abject and always at risk’ (p. 427), and Sanlo (2004) notes that ‘no work was found in the literature that explores resilience, positive survival skills, and academic success of sexual minority college students’ (p. 102). Savin-Williams (1990) echoes this finding, stating ‘social scientists, including lesbian and gay researchers, have focused almost exclusively on the “problems” at the expense of the “promises” of lesbian and gay youth’ (p. 182).

In addition, my later study on the experiences of gay students (Taulke-Johnson 2008) went beyond harassment and homophobia in capturing the nuances of how my participants skilfully and sensitively negotiated their sexuality at university, and offered a more balanced account of their lives within higher education. I noted that these participants reported only two incidents of indirect anti-gay behaviour rather than a catalogue of persecution; coming out was indeed an anxious process but it led to acceptance and empowerment rather than harassment and victimisation, and the

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<sup>15</sup> A transgender man who was raped and murdered in 1993 (at the age of 21). His story formed the basis of the film *Boys Don’t Cry*.

overwhelming response to disclosure of their sexuality was highly positive and supportive rather than being of wariness and revulsion<sup>16</sup>.

Contemporary positive stories of the gay experience may appear to be markedly distinct from those of adversity and suffering. However, they are not what Williams (1977) would term emergent (i.e. completely new) as they are typically positioned in relation to, and gain their meanings from, dominant victimised discourse. As Rofes (2004) states, gay celebratory accounts ‘continu[e] to rely upon the original deficit model of queer youth by defining these young people by their relationship to victimisation and suffering’ (pp. 58-59). Thus, atypical (i.e. positive) accounts of gay experiences are usually constructed and presented in the shadow of, or in some way in relation to, homophobia and victimisation – or, to borrow Talburt’s (2004) words, against ‘the ever-present spectre of at-risk hovering in the background’ (p. 119). This is evident in the terminology used to describe LGB people, such as Sanlo (2004) above noting the ‘resilience’ and ‘positive survival skills’ of gay students (p. 102), Herek et al. (2002) referring to them as ‘survivors’ (p. 322), and Rivers and Cowie (2006) talking about LGBs’ ‘resilience and recovery’ (p. 11). As Savin-Williams (2005) states, ‘it is as though positive gay development can’t really happen – there must be a negative underbelly somewhere’ (p. 181).

Harwood (2004) also reiterates the seemingly unbreakable connection between gay people and victimised discourse, with even the most positive of instances being defined in relation to the martyr-target-victim assumption.

The emphasis of this truth telling on woundedness obscures the notion of ‘wellbeing’, or at the very least, renders it a wellbeing that surfaces amidst much adversity. It is not a wellbeing sprung from ‘pleasure’, but one that emerges via the regulation of woundedness. (p. 472)

Nevertheless, studies which do propose alternative, counter, non-victimised accounts of gay lives and experiences mark ‘a significant departure’ from published research which ‘too often reinscribes pathological [LGB] stereotypes’ (Rasmussen and Crowley 2004 p. 428). The fact that there are reports of gay students who have not been physically

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 7 for a discussion of my PhD participants’ coming out stories.

assaulted, not experienced harassment, not heard derogatory comments, not been threatened, not seen anti-LGB graffiti, do not fear for their physical safety, are not closeted for worry of being targeted for harassment and victimisation, and do not perceive the campus environment as homophobic, point to there being space for alternative narratives of the gay student experience. I have tried to provide this in this thesis.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter with a discussion of the social, cultural and academic attention that has been given to the Matthew Shepard murder. I have illustrated how this incident has been positioned to represent the most extreme negative consequences of being a gay student, and has become what Williams (1977) would term the dominant story of this population. However, without in any way downplaying or diminishing the crime, there are features which fracture its link to the lived experiences of the majority of gay students. For example, as Anderson (2005a) notes, 'statistically speaking, Matthew Shepard's killing, as horrific as it was, was a statistical anomaly' (p. 82). Also, Shepard's abduction took place off campus; his assailants were not themselves students; and although the precise reasons for the attack will perhaps never be known, it does appear that class differences, alcohol and drugs may have played as much a role as Shepard's gayness. As such, his death should not be packaged or utilised as a convenient, contrived sound-byte to be automatically cited when discussing the gay student experience for, as this PhD supports, not all gay students are or even identify with Matthew Shepard<sup>17</sup>.

The majority of the studies detailed in this chapter report the 'pervasive victimisation, discrimination, and marginalisation experienced by the LGB population' (Tucker and Potocky-Tripodi 2006 p. 188) and focus on 'the prevalence of anti-gay violence and harassment ... within the higher education community' (Ivory 2005 p. 63). These issues do obviously need to be addressed. However, they should not be the sole concern for

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<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Shepard's iconic status has clouded the fact that he was a real person. I realised this myself following e-mail correspondence with Rulon Stacey, the previously mentioned CEO at the hospital where Shepard was admitted after he was found and where he died. This personalisation made this chapter difficult to write, for no longer was Matthew Shepard a symbol, celebrity, icon or martyr, nor simply a name to include in my thesis as an exemplar of the dominant gay victimised narrative – but a human being.

scholars, for 'the documentation and investigation of homophobia and heteronormativity are problematic when they constitute the sole basis of research' (Rasmussen 2004c p. 445). Hiller and Rosenthal (2001) state that 'we now have enough research data with which to make confident statements about some of the challenges same sex attracted young people face in their daily lives' (p. 2), but there is little work on any other aspects of being gay or on the gay experience – particularly in a university context.

I concur with Rofes (2004) that we need to question the appropriateness of this practice of locating and positioning all gay people within the martyr-target-victim model and (re)telling only their negative experiences. One of my main objectives in this thesis has therefore been to allow space for gay voices acknowledging joy, pleasure, happiness and empowerment to be heard when they have been expressed. Furthermore, I wanted to give these accounts the degree of attention and focus that has been afforded dominant stories of harassment and homophobia. However, just as Rofes (2004) achieved the delicate balance of advocating a paradigm shift away from an exclusive focus on victimization without denying or belittling the difficulties that some gay people encounter and experience, so I am not critiquing the martyr-target-victim framework itself. As has been demonstrated in this chapter by the Matthew Shepard murder and reports of widespread anti-gay sentiment and homophobic incidents at both US and UK universities, it is not redundant or inappropriate in locating and describing gay students' higher education experiences. Indeed, some of the accounts I report in this thesis from participants in this study also illustrate this. Thus, I do not challenge or problematise the victimised model as such, but rather its ubiquitousness, particularly when it overshadows and renders invisible gay students' alternative stories.

Therefore, in undertaking a contemporary study on gay students at a UK institution; engaging with an array of aspects of their lives at university that have not been significantly addressed previously, or which my participants' data reconfigures in some way; and giving space to stories which typically are untold; this research and thesis move beyond and advance the body of literature on this population, and provide a wider, more nuanced and thus richer understanding and insight into their experiences in higher education. In the next chapter I relate how the study was actually conceived, designed and undertaken to accomplish this.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCHING THE GAY STUDENT EXPERIENCE

I can imagine that it would be difficult to find people to do this, apart from going and standing outside gay clubs with a flyer when people couldn't really give a toss. (Will – a participant in this study)

Oh that's a really difficult question Richard [laughs]<sup>18</sup>. (Ollie – a participant in this study)

In the previous chapter I contextualized my study by providing an overview of the area of investigation as signified by the Matthew Shepard murder. I also situated the project within the associated academic work on gay students. Having thus 'set the scene' for my research, I now address methodological questions of *what* tools I used to obtain my data, *how* the study was conducted, and *why* it was carried out in this particular way.

This chapter may be approached with some trepidation, since my understanding of methods sections in PhD theses are that they are often dry and uninteresting. Here I do describe and justify my qualitative research design and situate it within a feminist methodological framework (Section 1), map my recruitment strategy (Section 2), detail how data was collected through semi-structured interviews and photographs (Section 3) and deconstruct the analytic procedure (Section 4)<sup>19</sup>. These discussions are necessary as they relate how I went about answering the study's research questions of how gay students negotiate and experience the regulated (hetero)sexualised space of university, and how their sexuality intersects with, influences and mediates their lives in higher education. However, this chapter is not sub-headed 'all you ever wanted to know about social science research methods but were afraid to ask'. Nor is it purely procedural as I also address some of the concerns, successes, joys, difficulties and problems I

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<sup>18</sup> Ollie's response to me asking him if he thought his male flatmates' behaviour, which could be read as anti-gay, was homophobic in intent (as discussed in Chapter 6).

<sup>19</sup> Conceiving, designing, undertaking and 'writing up' any substantive piece of social research is inevitably fragmented and messy (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Therefore, my dissection and presentation of the study's methodology into this linear series of distinct and self-contained stages is for reasons of clarity and ease of readership, rather than being a precise representation of the actual research process.



encountered when undertaking this project. Including pragmatic / empirical and emotive / reflexive accounts of carrying out this research results in a comprehensive, multi-faceted and rounded discussion of the study's methods and methodology.

### *Reflexivity and methods*

The methods chapter may be viewed as the most straight-forward part of the thesis to write, as sections of it (such as proposed research tools, design and rationale) are known and can be articulated at an early stage of the doctoral studies process – even before beginning any data collection. Also, the chapter is relatively structured in that it has to address the methodological questions of what, how and why. In spite of this, and despite holding MA and MSc qualifications in social science research methods, this chapter has actually been the most problematic and frustrating to write. Many of these difficulties have stemmed from my moving disciplines from psychology to qualitative sociology, and the respective shift from empirical accounts focussing on the 'nuts and bolts' of the research process to more reflexive considerations. One of my supervisor's most common comments when handing back each of the (numerous) amended versions of this chapter was that they were acceptable for a psychology thesis but not qualitative social science, meaning that they contained the necessary procedural details but were researcher-distant and lacked any indication of my personal journey in undertaking the study.

Thus, although in Chapter 1 I expressed my wariness about writing myself into this work excessively, here I have included reflexive discussions on aspects of the study which trouble the delineation of the research process as neat, straightforward and unproblematic, and convey my own investment in the work. Hence, I relate the frustrations in recruiting participants and reflect on issues of power, shared sexuality between myself and participants, and participant attraction (Section 3), and detail my reluctance when being told to 'critically engage' with my participants' data (Section 4).

These accounts are augmented with extracts from my research journal to 'bring them alive', and present my thoughts and feelings on these issues at the particular time(s) they arose in the research process. This journal appears an unlikely piece of academic equipment since I pasted pictures of men I found attractive on the cover, following my

supervisor's advice that this should be a book I would want to write in<sup>20</sup>. My priority when arriving at Cardiff University to begin this PhD was not to familiarise myself with the campus, become acquainted with administrative and academic members of the department, or build social networks with my peers – but to equip myself with an impressive array of brand new stationary, including a fountain pen, biros, different coloured highlighters, pencils, jotting pads, plastic wallets, a stapler, paperclips and folders, all these being viewed as integral parts of the postgraduate student tool kit. These have long since run out of ink, been lost, broken, used up, discarded and / or thrown away. However, the A4 hardback book that became my research journal has been a constant companion throughout my postgraduate study.

The journal's now very battered and worn appearance (due in part to it having been carried in my bag or sat on my desk every day I have worked on this project, used multiple times as a coaster, acted a pillow for 'power naps' in my office, often been thrown across the room in frustration by myself, and on occasion even wet with tears during particularly down periods of the study) mirrors the actual research process it maps within. It provided a space for reflection on some of the choices, judgments, difficulties and issues I grappled with at various stages of the project, and inside is a record of dates of interviews and meetings with supervisors; notes, observations and reflections on these sessions; reminders of readings to chase up; drafts of paragraphs and chapters written in long-hand; preliminary and half-formed analysis; e-mails I have printed and pasted in the book; and my thoughts and musings on my ability (or, most often, my perceived lack of it) to successfully undertake this course of study.

The journal is therefore a messy patchwork of research snapshots, fleeting expressions of emotion, cool evaluations, often highly critical self-examinations, and occasional academic insight. Each page is an indicator of how well (or badly) I perceived the research to be going at a particular moment, and these combine to map the journey of the highs, lows, challenges, problems, stresses and successes of undertaking this study. Although the journal was not written for the public gaze or intended to be read by anyone except myself, the inclusion of excerpts from it in this chapter highlights methodological concerns and complexities that may be absent in purely procedural

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<sup>20</sup> Hence, Jake Gyllenhaal, Tony Lundon and Asa Somers never knew that they acted as 'incentives' in the writing of this PhD.

accounts, but which I nevertheless experienced as significant. These extracts are presented unvarnished so as not to lose what I was thinking or feeling at the particular times I wrote them.

### **Section 1. Research design**

In this section I define the theoretical framework which informed the conception and undertaking of this research, and within which the entire study is located. I then detail and rationalise the research design, thereby addressing the methodological questions of why the study was conceived in this particular way and how it was conducted.

#### *Theoretical underpinnings*

The foregrounding of researcher through reflexivity (as touched upon above and illustrated throughout this chapter) is just one of the ways in which this study fits within a feminist methodological framework (e.g. Finch 1984; Oakley 1981; Skeggs 1995). It was emphasised in my very first PhD supervisory meeting that part of being a good qualitative researcher was the keeping of a reflexive research journal. It has already been noted that this book has been an essential tool during the undertaking of this study, and that I have included excerpts from it throughout this chapter to enrich and further insight into various aspects of the research process. Dialogues of respect, care and responsibility towards participants as indicated by discussions on harm and distress (below), power relations (Section 3), and critique of researcher detachment and neutrality (Section 4) are other indications of the influence of feminist epistemology on the way in which this research was conceived and carried out.

Feminist thought framed the principles of ethical conduct which guided this study, and I gave much consideration to issues of consent, anonymity and debriefing (as discussed in Section 3). Rigid ethical statements, guidelines, regulations and bodies governing social research have been criticised for not acknowledging that ethical concerns and decisions have to be contextually located, addressed and reasoned in the process of actually undertaking research – not least because dialogue between researcher and participant is always dynamic and fluid (Birch and Miller 2002; Hollway and Jefferson 2000). It was an institutional requirement that this study be granted formal approval from the departmental Ethics Committee following submission of relevant forms and documentation demonstrating ethical awareness. However, I took seriously my ethical

obligations and responsibilities to my participants, which extended beyond a group, body or organisation's formal approval.

Although I hope that through various forms of dissemination this PhD research gains some academic recognition, I wish it to be for methodological rigour, theoretical insight and academic integrity, and not irresponsible ethical conduct. I do not want any parallels to be made with Laud Humphreys' (1970) (in)famous study on gay sex in public toilets, which has the dubious distinction of being hailed as one of the most unethical pieces of research undertaken on homosexuality, and indeed in the social sciences (Babbie 2004). However, I did not make any special ethical accommodation or provision in this study specifically because my participants self-identified as gay. As has been detailed in Chapter 2, it is common practice to define this group as vulnerable. Treating my participants as 'special cases' simply because of their (non-hetero)sexuality would have reinscribed the martyr-target-victim identification framework (Rofes 2004, 2005) and contradicted one of the primary arguments of this thesis, that it is inappropriate to describe this population exclusively as disempowered, fragile and at risk.

Following my alignment to feminist emphasis on participant well-being, I mentioned in a supervisory meeting that should someone I was interviewing show signs of distress then I would turn off the recorder and suspend the session. My supervisors questioned this, and it led to an engagement with Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) question 'is it necessarily harmful [for participants] to experience being upset or distressed?' (pp. 86-87). This is a distinction I am still grappling with and unsure about.

My concerns with Hollway and Jefferson arise from their advocacy of 'shift[ing] the emphasis away from ethical principles which tend to treat distress and harm as equivalent problems' (p. 87). Like Finch (1984), they note the seductiveness of the interview situation in allowing people to talk about emotive issues in a confidential setting to a non-judgmental stranger, and providing a rare opportunity to really be listened to. In arguing that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, experiencing distress may be viewed as cathartic and beneficial rather than harmful, they reconfigure the interview as somewhere 'it can be reassuring and therapeutic to talk about an upsetting event' (p. 87). However, I would caution that despite similarities, interviews are *not* counselling or therapy, with one of the main differences being that counsellors and therapists are

trained to hold the space should clients become emotional and upset, and researchers are not.

My unease with Hollway and Jefferson's distinction between harm and distress meant that I was ready to pause and, if necessary, even terminate an interview if I saw that a participant was experiencing discomfort. However, in reflecting upon why this discussion 'touched a nerve', I realized that my saying I would stop the interviews was as much to do with halting *my* distress as that of my participants. It may have been an awareness (and perhaps apprehension) that my study, my questions, and the way I was conducting the interview sessions could impact negatively upon participants' emotional states, and the realization that they would not be feeling like this were they not taking part in my study, that led to my concerns. Hence, turning the recorder off and halting the interview would have been a strategy to contain my own discomfort rather than safeguard participants. However, looking back, having told participants that they could stop the interview prior to the session, it would have been presumptuous of me to make this decision for them if I judged them to be distressed. Hence, I do now agree with Hollway and Jefferson's view that the researcher should not assume that interrupting or terminating the interview is always the right thing to do, or what the participants actually want.

Such a situation did not ultimately arise in the interview sessions. However, my engagement with the issue has been significant in my development as a researcher.

### *Study design and rationale*

For this qualitative study, 17 male undergraduate students who identified as gay, and attended the same university, participated in two individual, face to face, semi-structured interviews with me. In this sub-section I firstly explain my reasoning for defining my sampling frame and choosing the research site, before presenting my research rationale to address questions of *why* I designed the study in this particular way. My aim here is to demonstrate a 'successful' (i.e. appropriate) match between the project's research design and its aims, objectives and research questions, as it is these methodological choices and decisions that ultimately determine the credibility and robustness of the work.

- *Sampling frame*

The examiners of my MSc dissertation (published as Taulke-Johnson 2008) on the experiences of gay students critiqued it for not including straight students in the sample. However, I deliberately did not research non-gay students in either the MSc or this PhD study as my objective in both projects was to undertake a comprehensive, in-depth examination of gay students' university experiences, and not to make any claims regarding sameness as or difference from their heterosexual peers. Also, interviewing straight students could be read as an implicit heterosexism, implying that gayness cannot be studied in isolation in and of itself but can only take form and have meaning and significance when compared to dominant, hegemonic heterosexual discourses defined as 'the norm'.

Another reason I researched gay male students only and not other non-heterosexualities was because although all such individuals and groups have to negotiate their stigmatized identities in a society which assumes, expects and heavily encourages conformity to straightness, each also faces 'unique developmental challenges' (Rhoads 1997a p. 283) and is socially, psychologically and culturally distinct (Ryan and Rivers 2003). The most apparent 'difference that makes a difference' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 138) between these groups are gender asymmetries which immediately differentiate and distinguish male and female experiences, regardless of sexuality.

Furthermore, in stating that 'subsuming "lesbian" into "gay" politics has the same implications as subsuming women into men: "we disappear"' (pp. 53-54), Auchmuty (1997) presents invisibility through assimilation and assumed homogeneity as an argument against the collapsing of non-heterosexualities (see also Burn et al. 2005; Kerfoot 2001). Thus, researching only gay men meant the unique qualities, characteristics and experiences of this subculture were not glossed over, ignored or lost (Gortmaker and Brown 2006). There were still differences amongst my sample in terms of, for example, nationality, age, year of study and degree subject. However, as the dataset was not complicated by variations of gender and sexuality, the similarities, tensions and discrepancies between my participants' accounts were easier to identify.

I understood from my previous research just how hard it was to recruit gay students, and also that the more restrictive the sample criteria the harder it usually is to find and / or access people to take part in the project. This relationship between stringency of participant eligibility and difficulty of recruitment informed my decision not to specify year of study or academic discipline in the sampling frame. Also, findings from my earlier research suggested no significant relationship between time spent within higher education and the type of data obtained on gay students' experiences (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999).

I recruited all participants from a single university as I was not intending to compare gay male students' experiences at different institutions, or determine whether they were shared or localized and institutionally specific. My choice of research site was informed by practicalities of the ease by which I could undertake the study in terms of distance and location, and also by how difficult I expected it to be to recruit participants from there. This latter judgment was informed by the size of the student body, and whether there was an active gay student population at the institution – as inferred from the presence of an LGBT Society.

The university I ultimately chose to recruit participants from is located in a medium-sized city in the UK and, according to its latest official figures at the time of writing (January 2008), has a student population of 25,500 (20,000 undergraduates and 5,500 postgraduates) across a range of academic schools and disciplines. It attracts 37,000 student applications per year for 4,500 available places. Such a high ratio is in part due to the institution's prestigious international status and reputation, as illustrated by its position in the World University Rankings compiled by the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. Reported first year completion rates are significantly higher than the national average, and the number of students who withdraw from their degree programmes is below the UK average of 22% as calculated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The reasons why participants chose to attend this particular university, and the intersection of their gayness on these decisions, is the focus of Chapter 5.

- *Research design*

As the study's aim was to describe rather than count, specify rather than generalise, interpret rather than predict, obtain data from a small number of individuals rather than a large group, and examine individual narratives rather than determine patterns or trends or causal relationships, I designed it as a qualitative project (Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Neuman 1997). Furthermore, I wanted to 'tap into' the rich and nuanced data of each participant's university experiences and interrogate the shades, inconsistencies, tensions, complexities and contradictions within it, for which a quantitative design would have been ill-equipped and inappropriate.

I decided to use face-to-face means of data collection as these allowed me to probe participants' accounts and request elaboration ( '*You spoke of your room being quite small. Is space important to you?*' ; '*You talked about gay issues in one of your seminars, about voting behaviour in San Francisco and gay identity. How did you feel about talking about this in front of your classmates?*' ) and / or clarification of their responses ( '*You mentioned about going to the gay clubs and that you said you might have been a bit too young. What did you meant by that?*' ; '*You said "When we got there we were sort of hiding away really because we didn't know how to talk to these people". What did you mean by "hiding away?"*' ), and swiftly address any misunderstandings or confusion:

*RTJ: You mentioned the internet ... How big a role does that play?*

*Ben: In general or in meeting gay people?*

*RTJ: Both.*

Also, the visibility of non-verbal communication provided a sub-text to participants' spoken responses in their interviews (Nairn et al. 2005). I used such cues mainly to gauge their interest and engagement when talking about a particular subject, and this informed my decision of which topics to address and include in this thesis, and which to set aside for the moment.

Individual interviews allowed me increased control over the direction of talk to ensure that all subjects were satisfactorily covered in the allotted time, and that if participants wandered from the topic under discussion they could easily be brought back on track



(*'Jumping back to accommodation ...'*; *'Just jumping back to something you said earlier ...'*). I did consider running a focus group to supplement and situate each participant's individual data in a wider context of collective norms, expectations, meanings, experiences and understandings. However, the group dynamics in this situation could influence what they would be willing to talk about and share in the session, and maintaining their confidentiality and anonymity would be difficult (Bloor et al. 2001; Payne and Payne 2004). Also, as not all my participants were out at university (as discussed in Chapter 7), it is doubtful whether their willingness to speak about issues relating to their gayness would extend to taking part in a group discussion. This assumption was supported by informal enquiries amongst the sample.

I chose a semi-structured interview format because its looseness means it is particularly effective in 'exploring shifting nuances of identity' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 201). This type of interview permitted insight into how participants personally reconstruct, prioritise and make sense and meaning of their experiences through the language they used and the weighting they gave a particular issue (Marshall and Rossman 1995). Also, I did not want to limit, constrain or dictate participants' narratives by asking them to adhere to a pre-determined set of answers, but instead allow them to talk about themselves and their experiences within their own individual response frameworks (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Nevertheless, I acknowledge that simply by designing interview guides listing the key topic areas I wanted to be addressed in the sessions, I was imposing my own reference frames on what I thought to be important and significant aspects of participants' university lives. However, 'the interviewer must maintain a delicate balance between providing enough openness for the participants to tell their stories and enough focus to allow the interview structure to work' (Seidman 1998 p. 13). Thus, each session required a focus and structure akin to a guided conversation with non-directive steering (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Kvale 1996) to obtain data relevant to the study's research questions.

I decided to undertake two interviews with each participant for a number of reasons. First, the broad topics I wanted to address (their higher education experiences as gay students in general, and with specific regard to university accommodation) lent themselves well to such a division. Second, as these are large subjects, I predicted that one interview session would be insufficient to engage with both of them in the

comprehensive and in-depth manner required for a PhD study. Third, I understood how easy it was in the interview situation to inadvertently miss or fail to follow-up on important points in participants' narratives, not to ask for clarification and elaboration, not to probe semi-formed and evasive responses, and not to request illustrative examples to support what participants are saying. Conducting a second interview therefore enabled me to 'mop up' any such omissions.

## **Section 2. Recruitment**

Having defined who my participants would be and where they would come from, I then had to devise a strategy to recruit people for the study. Although I was not seeking an empirically representative sample of the gay male undergraduate students attending the university (and I question if there is such a thing and, if so, what criteria it would be defined by), I was hoping to recruit a diverse one. This was not to satisfy any quantitative notions of generalisation, but I anticipated that interviewing participants from different disciplines and academic years; who were out on campus and in their student accommodation and who were closeted; who defined themselves by their sexuality and who framed it as only a small part of their identity; who were fully comfortable with their gayness and who were only beginning to come to terms with and address it; and who participated in gay culture and who did not; would result in a varied, rich and nuanced dataset with which to work.

Conducting this project confirmed that recruiting participants, and especially gay participants, 'is often one of the most difficult aspects of the research process' (Crozier and Clayton 2007 p. 3) - as Will noted in his opening quote to this chapter. My main obstacle was that, for a variety of reasons, not all students who self-identify as gay are out and / or visible on campus (Epstein et al. 2003; Hiller and Rosenthal 2001), hence them sometimes called a hidden or invisible population (Ivory 2005; Sanlo 2004). The success of the recruitment strategy I used for my earlier study (Taulke-Johnson 2008) in accessing gay male undergraduate students at university meant it served as a blueprint for this research. These methods were refined in accordance to their effectiveness in that project, and tailored to address this PhD's particular sampling frame and focus. In addition, new means of recruitment were used alongside these proven ones.

To make the male student population at the university aware of the study I asked administrators in each of the institution's schools to forward an e-mail to all the male undergraduate students registered in their departments. Variable institutional co-operation to this request led to difficulties and frustrations in recruiting participants via this channel. For example, some administrators did not forward the e-mail, explaining that doing so was against departmental policy, or that (surprisingly) they did not have a distribution list of the male undergraduate students registered in their schools. Also, despite being presented with confirmation that the study had been approved by my own department's ethics committee, administrators in another school requested that it be passed by their own committee before allowing the e-mail to be forwarded to their students.

Other means of recruitment were placing an advert in the student newspaper, and prominently displaying posters on notice boards in both academic and non-academic buildings around the campus (i.e. in the Students' Union, student libraries, the Student Services centre). I also logged details of the study and requests for participants on the university's e-message board, which was seen by everyone who signed into the institution's computer network.

I spent much time considering how to design these recruitment materials and present myself in ways that would encourage people to come forward and take part in the research<sup>21</sup>. These strategies included stating my name, my sexuality, that this project was being undertaken for a PhD, and an explicit commitment to anonymity.

I believed that students would be more inclined to participate in the study if the researcher was presented as a person rather than as an anonymous, distant and ethereal presence – especially in a project such as this where personal issues of self and identity were to be addressed. I also thought it most important to make explicit my sexuality on the recruitment information to provide assurance that the researcher would most

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<sup>21</sup> Incidentally, even though I obviously do not have the data to do so, it would be most interesting to identify what factors *discouraged* eligible students from participating in the study, why some people who expressed an initial interest in taking part did not reply when I forwarded more extensive details of the project and what their participation would involve, and why one participant (Daniel) disengaged from the research after his first interview.

probably be non-homophobic and non-heterosexist. Making it clear that I was gay did influence Ollie's decision to take part in the study, who stated *'If you had said I'm a heterosexual bloke doing a study into gay issues I would have thought "Ha, I'm not going there"'*. Ollie indicated that being straight might problematise researching gay men, insinuating an empathy and understanding derived from a shared frame of reference, which a non-gay researcher may be perceived as lacking. The effects that knowledge of researcher gayness had on the actual interviews, and a discussion on how much 'sameness' there actually was between myself and participants, is addressed in the next section of this chapter on data collection (Section 3).

Students face many requests to participate in research projects within the university. Stating that this particular study was for a PhD lent it some distinction, importance and prestige, which some participants responded to. For example, Jack explained that *'if you say it's for a PhD it certainly does pack a bit more of a punch ... and you think well it's a respectable project'*, Todd stated *'because it's a PhD I guess it's a bit more important'*, and Harry similarly said *'the fact that it was a PhD yeah made it more credible'*. In contrast, Andrew noted that knowing the research was for a PhD made him feel *'intimidated a little bit'* because *'I was just getting nervous by [being interviewed by] someone who has a lot more in his brain than I do'*. It is perhaps easy to forget that a PhD project and / or student may appear daunting – although Andrew nevertheless did still volunteer and take part in the study.

I also made a commitment on the recruitment materials (that allowed space to do so) that steps would be taken to safeguard each participant's identity. The importance of anonymity was highlighted when Jack e-mailed me prior to his first interview, asking for confirmation that his real name would not be used in the research. I explained that although anonymity can never actually be fully guaranteed, I would disguise and/or delete those parts of his data which identified or threatened to identify him. As Jack did participate in the study, these assertions did provide the intended reassurance.

In addition to the above means of recruitment, I also specifically targeted gay students at the university. As part of the recruitment strategy for my 2008 study at the same institution I approached the students' LGBT Society, although its members had been reticent to volunteer for that project. I believe this was in part due to research fatigue and overload, since I knew of other students who had contacted the group requesting

participation in their studies. Nevertheless, I liaised with the Society again for this research as it was a new academic year which meant the group had had an influx of new members, and so might prove to be a more successful source of recruitment. This time there was much co-operation. In addition to raising awareness of the study at a number of their weekly meetings, the Society's committee forwarded details of the research to everyone on their e-mail list, thus ensuring that those members who did not attend these events were still made aware of the project.

A means of recruitment I utilized specifically for this PhD (as I was unaware of its existence earlier), and which proved to be an exceptionally effective way of accessing and recruiting participants for this study, was contacting gay students at the university through the social networking website Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)). The search facility on this site enabled me to browse profiles of all the male students who attended this particular institution and who stated their sexuality as gay<sup>22</sup>. This exercise did not capture all the gay students at the university who used Facebook, since not everybody would have chosen to state their non-heterosexuality on a website where the information is subject to the public gaze. Nevertheless, the search still returned a total of 158 profiles. I sent a message with brief details of the study to each of these people, asking if they would be interested in participating. I also posted details of the research and requests for participants in the virtual forum and notice board of a Facebook group which had been created and was run by gay students attending the university I was recruiting my sample from.

To use Facebook I had to join this online community and create my own profile, and it was here that issues of self-presentation were brought to the fore. In fact, I could write an entire chapter on how I presented myself in this cyber space, and the reasoning for these choices. Briefly, I constructed my profile in accordance with my assumption that people would be less wary and anxious to come forward to participate in the study if I presented myself as a 'real person' rather than an academic or professional researcher. Thus, the photograph I posted as my main profile picture showed me with my two dogs, I filled in sections detailing my interests, favourite films and books and music, and in the

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<sup>22</sup> Facebook interestingly no longer offers this option to search profiles on sexuality criteria. I have messaged the website asking why this facility has been removed, but have not received a reply to this enquiry.

box entitled 'about me' I wrote a self-deprecating penpicture (i.e. self-description). However, I also wanted to convey some degree of academic responsibility, and so I listed my higher education qualifications and research interests. Also, I did not post any pictures of me on nights out or drunk, which are present in the majority of Facebook profiles<sup>23</sup>.

People who did e-mail me saying they were interested in participating in the study, having been made aware of it through one or more of the above recruitment channels, were forwarded comprehensive details of the nature and purpose of the research, the broad themes and topic areas likely to be covered in the interviews, and what participation in the project would entail. I tried to provide sufficient information about the aims and requirements of the study for them to make a considered judgment as to whether to volunteer.

I was pleased that this recruitment strategy resulted in 17 people taking part in the study, this being a greater number than I had expected, anticipated or hoped for. Ultimately, 1 participant was recruited from seeing a poster on campus, 1 from an e-mail sent by a school administrator, 1 from the e-mail sent by the LGBT Society, 1 through being approached by a member of academic staff who was aware of the study and knew this student was gay, and 13 through Facebook, which does seem a particularly useful and effective means of both accessing and recruiting from this population. Demographic details of the sample and participant penpictures are presented in the following chapter (Chapter 4).

### **Section 3. Data collection**

Having detailed the recruitment strategy I devised for the study, I now turn to the process of data collection. This section is divided into two parts. The first is a procedural and therefore mainly descriptive account of how data was obtained, whilst the second is a reflexive consideration of some of the methodological issues which arose and were experienced as significant during this stage of the research.

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<sup>23</sup> I was hoping to include a screen shot of my Facebook profile in the appendix of this thesis. However, it was not possible to copy and paste from the website. I have been told that most social networking sites have such measures in place for 'privacy and security reasons'.

*Data collection part 1. Procedural account*

Data collection ran for a period of 10 months between February and November 2007. Even though I was aware of the dynamic nature of qualitative research, and the possibility of unforeseen and unexpected topics arising in the interviews (Malone 2003; Thompson 2002), I still asked participants to read and sign a consent form prior to their first interview. These documents have been criticised for assuming that what will / will not be covered in the data collection stage can be known and thus articulated in these forms prior to any fieldwork actually being undertaken (Miller and Bell 2002). Also, in contractualising the relationship and (re)affirming participants' sub-dominant and subordinate positioning in this dynamic, they arguably emphasise and increase power differentials between researcher and participant.

However, I propose that in formalising the researcher / participant relationship these forms lent the study a sense of academic credibility, which some participants responded positively to. Ben, for example, stated with reference to the project that *'It's legit because you've got papers'*. Furthermore, asking participants to read and sign consent forms arguably empowered rather than disempowered them, the gesture being a means of increasing participants' engagement with the research, and making them realise they were not simply 'talking heads' but had an active and important role to play – which corresponded to my aims of reducing power and status inequalities between researcher and participant, as discussed in the next sub-section.

As consent is always in process, it was (re)negotiated throughout each interview (Birch and Miller 2002). I did this verbally such as by asking *'Do you mind telling me about it?'* and *'Are you alright talking about this?'*, and also by drawing participants' attention to the digital recorder at various points in the session through quick but noticeable glances. This latter practice mirrors those of Renold et al. (2008) who relate how, for reasons of transparency, they ensured that their recording device was in full view of their child participants when collecting their data, and how their utterances such as 'it's still recording' (p. 435) reminded participants that they were taking part in a study. My looking at the device not only ensured that the interview was still being recorded, but it also (re)framed and (re)positioned the situation as a research session. Thus, when participants did not ask for the recorder to be turned off and did not terminate their

involvement in the interviews following these mini pantomimes, I took their silence as indication and confirmation of their continuing consent to take part in the research.

In the first interview I asked each participant about their pre-student biographies of being gay, and particularly how they negotiated their sexuality within their family and home communities, as I felt this information would be most important in contextualising their accounts of their lives at university. This data is drawn upon most evidently in my discussion of participants' university choices (Chapter 5). I then explored the significance participants framed their sexuality as having (Chapter 4), the ways in which it shaped their higher education decisions (Chapter 5), and their actual experiences of being gay students at university - i.e. relationships with flatmates (Chapter 6), coming out (Chapter 7), and gay performativity (Chapter 8).

Following this interview, I asked participants to take photographs of the interiors of their current student accommodation. I envisaged that these pictures would provide a visual accompaniment and complement to their verbal accounts of these environments, as well as facilitate discussion in the second interview on how they negotiated their gay identities there. Asking participants to take their own photographs provided space in the research design for joint participation in data collection, and therefore put feminist epistemology regarding participant involvement and engagement in the study into research practice. Participants e-mailed me their photos prior to their second interview so that I could prepare notes and questions about the pictures before the session. Data on participants' student accommodation from their second interviews is included in chapters 6 to 8.

There was a tension between leaving as much time as possible between the two interviews to familiarise myself with the data from the first interview, and not allowing so much to elapse that any connection and rapport with the participant was lost. This did actually occur with Daniel, who took part in a first interview but then did not supply any photographs or respond to e-mails requesting we schedule a second interview<sup>24</sup>. Where possible, I ran the first and second interviews within a month of each other, depending

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<sup>24</sup> I have nevertheless still included in this thesis analysis of Daniel's data from the interview he did participate in, as he gave his permission to do so when he volunteered for the study and signed his consent form.



on participants' availability and commitments. This gave me sufficient time to transcribe and reflect upon the first interview before conducting the next.

Each interview took place on university premises to ensure a degree of privacy and confidentiality. Also, as all participants had to attend lectures and seminars on campus, it made practical sense to conduct the data collection sessions there. Everyone gave their permission for both of their interviews to be audio-recorded with a small, unobtrusive, digital device. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours each, and no more than two. I was aware from conducting previous research that after this amount of time the attention and concentration of both researcher and participant tends to wane and 'a situation of diminishing returns sets in' (Seidman 1998 p. 14).

Again in accordance to feminist methodology and concerns regarding participant welfare and well-being, a thorough debriefing session immediately followed each interview. Here I reiterated to participants the aims and objectives of the study, explained why certain procedures had been used, and detailed what would happen to their data. These sessions also gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions they might have regarding the research, which was something I also invited and encouraged them to do prior to, between and even in each interview.

Additionally, in the debriefing session after the first interview I gave participants a list detailing the phone numbers, contact details and opening hours of the university, local, and national switchboards and support groups. This meant that, should they have felt the need to do so, they could speak to a professional counsellor following their involvement in the study. I had not compiled this information because I expected participants would need to contact such groups, but because the unpredictability of semi-structured interviews meant there was the possibility that emotional, distressing and / or upsetting topics could be raised in the sessions. To this end, every interview was conducted within office hours so that the university student support services could be contacted immediately if required - although such a precaution was ultimately not needed.

It has been argued that 'researchers tend to spend a considerable amount of time anticipating the possible effects research will have on participants, yet little time considering their own needs' (Poole et al. 2004 p. 80). Emotion is 'a crucial part of the

research experience' (Hubbard et al. 2001 p. 119), and researchers have reported feelings of anxiety, having nightmares, insomnia and headaches, and being depressed as a result of their work (McCosker et al. 2001). I therefore developed strategic responses for myself to deal with any negative effects of conducting the study, for example should I feel touched, troubled, saddened or angry by a participant's narrative. In addition to knowing I could utilise the university student support services myself, my other 'coping techniques' included establishing a support network of supervisors, peers, friends and family to whom I could 'discharge some of my feelings' (Etherington 1996 p. 346) and receive support (whilst obviously maintaining anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of their data) if required.

Following each interview I saved the audio recordings on my computer in password protected folders. These files were labelled with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves (this being another strategy to further their involvement in, and impact on, the study) and not their actual names. Although anonymity and confidentiality can never be fully guaranteed (Christians 2005), safeguarding the identities of my participants was of paramount importance – as it would be in any research project where the people taking part do not wish to be identified, whether they are gay or not. Regardless of the extent to which each participant's sexuality was known, I did not wish their gayness to be 'leaked' as a result of them taking part in my study. This concern was not because I feared the knowledge would lead to them being harassed and victimised, but rather to adhere to standard ethical and professional integrity regarding participant anonymity. Also, coming out (or not) is a personal choice, and not for me to determine. To reiterate a point made earlier in this chapter, I did not make any special provision for my participants, ethical or otherwise, because they were gay.

As a side-note with regard to safeguarding anonymity, I did 'bump into' some participants outside of the interview room. In such instances, if either of us were with company, an acknowledgement from either party could lead to enquiries from people as to how we knew one another. Sometimes the participants purposefully ignored me, sometimes they nodded or said a quick 'hi' as they walked past, and sometimes they stopped and chatted. I respected how each chose to play out the situation, letting them take the lead with whatever (non)acknowledgement they were comfortable with, and I responded accordingly.

I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim, but as I was not undertaking a comprehensive discourse analysis of participants' utterances I refrained from notating and timing hesitations and pauses. In accordance with common research protocol to protect participants' identities, I disguised or deleted any information which threatened anonymity.

Transcribing only those parts of interviews which appear to be important and significant to the research questions and objectives is not a fully accepted practice, not least because the researcher is here making judgments and choices regarding what data will be / will not be relevant – decisions which arguably should be and can only be informed having transcribed and worked through all the dataset. As Seidman (1998) notes, 'although that approach is labour-saving, it is not desirable because it imposes the researcher's frame of reference on the interview data one step too early in the winnowing process' (p. 98). However, I also acknowledge that while full transcription may be preferable, it should be 'a matter of practical purpose rather than a theoretical convention to which one must genuflect' (Housley and Fitzgerald 2009 p. 132).

The amount of data obtained for this study was considerable, with 33 in-depth interviews resulting in 41.75 hours worth of audio recordings corresponding to 774 (one-sided, single spaced) pages (434,686 words) of transcription.

#### *Data collection part 2. Reflexive account*

In this section I reflect upon some of the methodological issues that arose during the data collection stage of the research. Addressing these in a separate sub-section rather than incorporating them in the main body of the text allows them to be discussed and focused on in some detail, and ensures the points raised are not 'lost'. I also augment these discussions on power relations between myself and participants, the influence of our shared sexuality on the research, and participant attraction, with excerpts from my research journal.

*Power*

*Another day with no e-mails. Why aren't people coming forward? It's like drawing blood from a stone, really it is. No idea how else I can recruit people, think I've exhausted all the options. Hopefully the people who have said they will take part will know other gay guys and ask them to take part too. I'm really anxious about this, cos if I don't get participants then I can't do the study which means I can't do the PhD which means going back home with tail between my legs and back to marketing bloody thermal underwear. God I need a drink. Stress stress stress!!!!!!!*

It has been argued that unequal power relations between researcher and participant can never be completely eradicated (Gillies and Alldred 2002), for 'research interviews may inescapably involve power imbalances' (Ribbens 1989 p. 580). Nevertheless, following feminist critique of and reaction against patriarchal methodology which reinscribed the subordination of women, I incorporated a number of strategies into the research design in a deliberate attempt to position the dynamic between myself and my participants on a more level plane. These included establishing reciprocal relationships with the participants and increasing their involvement in the study as a means of empowerment. These practices went some way to meeting the feminist objectives of 'produc[ing] non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to overcome the separation between the researcher and the researched' (Cotterill 1992 p. 594), and 'challeng[ing] the idea that the researched are just objects of a voyeuristic bourgeois gaze' (Skeggs 1994 p. 81).

In what has been described as a 'classic work' (Irwin 2006 p. 158), Ann Oakley (1981) argues that such power inequalities are demonstrated and perpetuated by participants opening up whilst researchers remain distant and detached. One way the skewed power relations embedded in the research process may therefore be reduced is through the mutual exchange of information, rather than it simply flowing in the direction from participant to researcher (Kirsch 2005). Consequently, I shared my views on films, music and celebrities when they were mentioned by participants. For example, when Jake mentioned the film *A Star is Born* I said 'I know some of the songs but I haven't seen the film', and when he talked of *Brokeback Mountain* I asked 'Have you read the book? It's just as good as the film'. When necessary I also drew upon my biography to clarify questions, such as in the example below when explaining to Noah what I meant

by objects being coded gay signifiers. But of course it was the participants' lives and experiences that were the focus of these interviews and this research, not mine.

Well, talk about my room for example. On my shelf I've got some books – Terry Pratchett Discworld stuff – that my ex [boyfriend] gave me. Alright I like Terry Pratchett anyway, but they've also got a sort of meaning related to my sexual orientation. Is there anything here [in your room] that you could point at and say well you couldn't tell it's gay but it's got a relationship to your sexual orientation?

Another means of reducing power imbalances between myself and participants was to maximise their roles and input throughout the different stages of the research (Edwards and Mauthner 2002). Thus, participants had a say in determining when and where their interviews were conducted, were asked to read and sign a consent form signalling their agreement to participate in the study, chose their own pseudonyms, wrote their own penportraits (which are presented in Chapter 4) so that they could describe themselves in their own words in the thesis, were informed they could ask questions about the project and could withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason<sup>25</sup>, dictated (to a degree) in their semi-structured interviews the actual flow and direction of the discourse, and took their own photographs of their student accommodation. Such steps increased participants' roles beyond simply being 'the passive givers of information' (Maynard 1994 p. 15).

One of the small but noticeable ways in which I could gauge the reduction of power discrepancies and hierarchies between myself and participants was through their changing modes of address. They initially addressed me as 'Richard' when responding to having seen recruitment materials and expressing a preliminary interest in taking part in the study, as this had been the name stated on the posters, in my e-mails from school administrators and in my Facebook messages. However, when e-mailing me their photographs following their first interviews, many called me 'Rich' (and a couple even

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<sup>25</sup> Although participants were told they could decline to answer any questions, turn off the recorder and withdraw from the study, none actually did any of these things in their interview sessions (Daniel terminated his involvement in the project, but he did so outside the research setting after his first interview, and without letting me know). This may have been because they did not feel the need to do so. However, another possible reading is that, for whatever reason, the dynamics of the research situation meant participants did not feel able to do so. In this latter instance, offering these options in the knowledge that they were unlikely to be taken up was a false choice.

included kisses at the end of their messages!). Although I did not facilitate or encourage this abbreviation, I did welcome it as an indication that as participants felt comfortable enough to address me in this informal and familiar way, they had not positioned me as untouchable researcher on a pedestal.

However, since ‘interviews are fluid encounters where [power] balances shift between and during different interview situations’ (Cotterill 1992 p. 593), power differentials in social research are not always in favour of the researcher (Campbell and Wasco 2000). The extract from my research journal reported at the beginning of this section on power illustrates that, for myself, feelings of disempowerment were particularly potent in the recruitment stage of the study. I also felt powerless when participants failed to turn up for their interviews and the sessions had to be rescheduled.

*X didn't turn up for his interview. Waited for 20 minutes, waste of time. That's the second person. So rude and unfair ... Got an e-mail apologising for no show because he 'forgot'. Sent the usual no worries reply and have rescheduled. Have to be nice to him cos I need him to take part for the numbers.*

This entry from my research journal conveys my feelings of anger and frustration at being ‘stood up’ by a participant. These emotions were exacerbated by the realisation that I had to hide them from the participant so as not to jeopardise his continued co-operation in the study. My displeasure was therefore not only due to him failing to turn up for his interview, but also at having to adopt a veneer of understanding and unconcern, and mask my true feelings so as to encourage and ensure that this participant did reschedule his interviews. These incidents of participant dependency highlighted how these people can wield considerable power in the research situation, and brought home how researchers are ‘at the mercy of those whom they are studying if their research is to be successful’ (Crowson 1987 p. 24).

### *Shared sexuality*

My identity and biography became a methodological issue as the research both benefited from, and was complicated by, my position as gay researcher studying gay students. As noted above, some participants said that knowledge of my sexuality was a factor in encouraging them to volunteer for the study. However, as discussed in this sub-section,

some reported that shared gayness also had influenced the data they had chosen to disclose / not disclose in their interviews.

There is a significant literature on the interpersonal dynamics of ‘sameness’ (Hey 2000 p. 176) in social inquiry. Troyna (1998), for example, examines his status as a white researcher studying black men, and questions whether “‘genuine” and “accurate” accounts are more likely to be elicited if there is a symmetry between the ethnicity of the interviewer and respondent’ (p. 97). Many feminist researchers frame gender symmetry between researcher and participants as advantageously altering the dynamics of the research situation (Finch 1984; Oakley 1981), since ‘shared discourse can create intimacy and enable greater exchange of information than would otherwise be the case’ (Ward and Winstanley 2006 p. 311). It has even been suggested, albeit nearly 20 years ago, that only female researchers should research female participants (Abbott and Wallace 1990).

However, there have been cautions against overemphasising the importance of homogeneity and the salience of a single shared characteristic between researcher and participant (e.g. Edwards 1993; Phoenix 1994; Tang 2002), and the extent to which this may overcome ‘differences that make a difference’ (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 138) inherent in the relationship dynamic. Cotterill (1992), for example, critiques the assumption that ‘the individual and collective experience of female oppression [can be] seen to create an identification sufficient to cut across structural barriers of status, class, and age in unique forms of communication and understanding’ (p. 600), Troyna (1998) reminds us that ‘no individual belongs to one, single, socially constructed category’ (p. 108), and Binnie (1995) argues ‘a recognition of how different we are from straights should not blind us to the differences among sexual dissidents’ (pp. 197-198). Other female researchers have warned that shared gender with participants does not always equate to shared experiences and understanding. For example, Riessman (1987) states that ‘the lack of shared experience between the middle-class, white interviewer and the working-class, Puerto Rican interviewee has created barriers to understanding’ (p. 183); Ramazanoglu (1989) notes class and life experience differences in her research of women shiftworkers; and Edwards (1993) discusses her awareness of ethnic differences when she interviewed black women. Bola (1996) and Phoenix (1994) also reflect on such researcher / participant asymmetry as, respectively, a childless Asian woman researching

white women's experiences of pregnancy, and a black researcher interviewing white participants.

Engagement with this literature led me to reflect on the ways in which my shared sexuality with my participants impacted on this study. I was particularly interested in the question do you have to be gay to study gay people? Will downplayed the importance of congruent gayness, stating '*No I don't think so [I would have acted differently if I thought you were straight]. I think it's about how you listen and how you ask your questions*'. He therefore saw it as secondary to issues of personality and interviewing skills in affecting his data. However, as detailed below, many participants did say that (a)symmetrical sexuality would have influenced their responses in their interviews, in being a determinant of what data they were willing to share with me. Nevertheless, I have to allow some critical distance from their assertions here, because what people think and say they would do is not necessarily the same as what would actually occur in practice.

Todd and Jack, for example, both stated that they '*wouldn't have been as open*' with a straight researcher, although the topics of censorship varied. Jack pointed to his restrictive home environment (as discussed in Chapter 5 on participants' university choices), saying '*Like especially with parents things and back home, I don't think I would have been inclined to say anything*'. Vivian alternatively stated '*I wouldn't be so blatant with sex remarks like "Oh I'd shag him"*' had he not known I was gay. These utterances support Weeks et al.'s (2001) statement that 'the existence of perceived commonalities between respondents and researchers can have a significant role to play in determining the extent to which trust develops within the interview' (p. 205). In these above instances my shared sexuality was key to participants allowing me privileged access into areas of their lives which they experienced as private, sensitive and / or upsetting, and which they said straight researchers would not have been privy to.

In their knowledge and positioning of me as a gay researcher, some participants equated shared sexuality with empathy, understanding and an 'emotional shorthand' (Ward and Winstanley 2006 p. 311). For example, they stated '*I think there's a bit more of an understanding and an appreciation like if you're a gay student studying gay students*' (Jack), '*You can relate more because you know what it's about*' (Vivian), '*You*



*understand this more because you've been there yourself ... [there's] maybe a common ground'* (James) and *'A straight man wouldn't know how it is'* (Alex). These participants therefore assumed that my gayness meant an overlapping of common life events and comprehension. Consequently, I had to be careful that they did not take 'short cuts' when talking about their experiences, thinking that our shared sexuality meant that I could fill in the gaps or 'dot the Is and cross the Ts' of their data. As James, Vivian and Alex stated respectively, *'You're kind of understanding what I'm saying. You don't feel like you have to explain things a bit more cos you know it'*, *'You know what I mean by "screaming queen" and the difference between someone being gay and someone being really camp'* and *'If the researcher was straight I would have to explain some things a bit more'*. When such slippage did occur, I encouraged participants through probing and additional questioning to more fully articulate the points they were making. Asking participants to further explain themselves not only clarified what they were saying, but also served as a cross-check strategy for myself. I did not want to make unwarranted or mistaken interpretations of their data based on our congruent sexuality, for sometimes assumptions of shared meanings are unfounded and incorrect.

Some participants therefore very firmly positioned me as 'one of them'. However, the homogeneity and understanding that same sexuality may afford should not be overemphasised. James noted this in stating *'Of course everyone's different so you might not understand certain things I say. I'm not saying that every gay man understands every other gay man – far from it'*. I shared with my participants a gay sexuality, and stories about being closeted, coming out, and same-sex intimate relationships. Also, like them, I had to negotiate my student life against the assumptions and expectations of compulsory heterosexuality operating within higher education. However, as conveyed in my research journal (below), I was very much aware that there were social, cultural, personal and academic factors (such as age, level of education, nationality, birthplace and interests) which differentiated and distanced me from participants. I therefore inhabited the positions of both 'an insider and an outsider in ways that are intricate and intertwined' (Foster 1994 p. 143).

*I feel so damn old interviewing all these young guys. There's no researcher power – they're the ones who make me feel crap. God I hate myself for being a fat ugly old queer. I feel so EMBARRASSED interviewing them, what must they think of me? I feel little – if any - connection to them. There's soooooooooo much difference.*

These (perceived) differences meant researching these participants had quite a depressing psychological effect, with which I struggled. Being undergraduates, they all were significantly younger than me, with approximately a 15 year difference in ages. Interviewing these students made me nostalgic for the times I had spent during my first degree. Also, they were good-looking, attractive, dressed in fashionable clothes, looked physically fit, and seemed to be enjoying a relatively stress-free time as undergraduate students – everything I was / am not. Furthermore, there were moments in the interviews when my distance from participants was made apparent, such as when they talked about nightclubs, films, books, magazines, websites, celebrities, characters on the gay scene and gay students I was not aware of and did not know.

However, despite the fact that I experienced these differences negatively, they were also (unintentionally) beneficial to the research. The instances when I displayed lack of knowledge and ignorance challenged any positioning of me as all-knowing researcher, and in doing so diminished (and arguably reversed) hierarchical power relations, with participants becoming expert and knowledgeable. Such moments were unplanned and unforeseen, and thus were 'happy accidents' which served to reinscribe the feminist tenet of participant empowerment – which, as reiterated throughout this chapter, was important to me in this study.

To summarise, there appeared to be a trade off with regard to my shared sexuality with participants. They said that knowing I was gay meant they were more willing to come forward to participate in the study, and were more open in their disclosure choices in their interviews than had I been straight. However, their assumptions of shared sexuality equalling shared meaning and understanding were not always correct. Also, knowing I was gay meant that sometimes participants' data was initially in short hand, varnished and glossed over as they assumed that my own supposedly congruent biography and experiences as a gay son / young man / student would enable me to 'fill in the gaps'. This meant I had to ask for explanation and / or elaboration. As such, there is an

argument that although *not* being part of the imagined community being researched and having a different ontological lens than those being studied may result in participants restricting what they are willing to disclose in their interviews, disassociation from them could result in more fully articulated accounts. Also, the very strangeness of participant 'otherness' may lend insight and critical distance not obtained from being a member of the group being researched. Determining whether you have to be gay to study gay people, and the extent to which my sexuality facilitated what participants termed an 'understanding' and 'appreciation' between us, is therefore a complicated judgement.

### *Participant attraction*

*'I'm as corny as Kansas in August'<sup>26</sup> ... Met X for his first interview today. I had 'dressed up' for the part as I wanted to make a good first impression. Felt very nervous about meeting him, even more so than the other people I've interviewed. Saw him coming up the Student Union steps before he saw me – he was stunning. Beautiful ... Interview went very well, although I was aware of trying too hard to put on a good performance as researcher – mirroring body language, making a few jokes to put him at ease, buying him a coffee before starting, all that crap. Got some EXCELLENT data from him, even though it was difficult not to get lost in his eyes lol<sup>27</sup> ... I feel really really bad about this. I shouldn't feel this way about him. I shouldn't be looking forward to seeing him again for the second interview. Damn!*

Feelings of participant attraction sexualised, problematised and benefited this study. When messaging those people on Facebook who met the sample criteria to ask if they would be interested in taking part in the research, one particular profile caught my attention. The photos posted on it showed someone who embodied many of the physical attributes I find appealing – dark spiky hair, dimples, cheeky smile, slim, and unshaven. Having sent this person the standard recruitment message I had forwarded to the other people flagged up by my Facebook search, I waited (and hoped) that he would reply saying that he would take part in the study. And he did.

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<sup>26</sup> The first line from the song 'A Wonderful Guy' from the musical *South Pacific*.

<sup>27</sup> Lol – acronym for 'laugh out loud'.

As illustrated in the above extract from my research journal, the intersection of erotic subjectivity, sexual objectification and academic responsibility caused me much concern, not least because the silence on the topic in the academic arena suggested it was a non-issue for ‘proper’, ‘legitimate’ or ‘professional’ researchers. Issues of either or both researcher and participants being positioned as objects of sexual desire, and of these relationships continuing outside the research setting and developing into friendship, sexual relations, and even marriage (Irwin 2006), are typically ‘non-subject[s]’ (Newton 1996 p. 214) in social science discussion (Lerum 2001).

Such relative lack of academic engagement with these topics is, I believe, in part due to admissions of participant attraction, desire and intimacy being incongruent with ‘the ongoing power of the myth of the researcher as detached and objective’ (Cullen et al. 2002 p. 382), which appears to be potent even in qualitative social science inquiry. Emotional and physical involvement with participants supposedly signals a lack of self-control and irrationality, and is ‘extraordinarily distorting to observation, impression, and interpretation’ (Bryant 1999 pp. 328-329). The outcry that greets acknowledgements of close researcher / participant relationships (Kulick and Willson 1995) demonstrates the strength of the opinion that in academia the personal and the professional are markedly distinct realms, and should be mutually exclusive.

As noted above, the sentiment that a ‘good’ researcher is one who is emotionally detached and does not allow personal matters or concerns to interfere with or contaminate their work, has been widely critiqued by feminist writers (Irwin 2006; Lerum 2001). Nevertheless, I spent much time berating myself for wanting this person to volunteer for the research, angry at my feelings for him being evoked simply from a picture on the internet, for being pleased when he said he would participate, and for approaching his interviews differently to other participants’ by ‘dressing up’ and trying to make a good impression. My interpretation of this behaviour as ‘unethical’ and ‘wrong’ was perhaps informed by there remaining a trace from my psychological (and positivist) background of the privileging of researcher detachment and distancing – even to the extent that I considered cancelling his interviews. This incident therefore illustrates how adapting to different ways of thinking following the shift from quantitative to qualitative disciplines, and the resultant changes of ontological and epistemological lenses, has been one of my primary challenges in undertaking this study.

In discussing participant attraction, the issue of power becomes most significant. Objections to acknowledging such feelings may be derived from wariness of what could happen if they were acted upon. In such situations, researcher power becomes exploitative, with participants perhaps feeling obliged to reciprocate or unable to refuse any researcher advances. My role as researcher did empower me in a number of ways, but in this situation I actually felt very much disempowered, positioning myself as subservient in feeling that this person would never think me attractive (as touched upon in the previous sub-section on the ways in which I felt different from my participants in spite of our shared sexualities). However, even had I thought myself 'in with a chance' I would not have acted upon my feelings, being sensitive of how easily the situation could become exploitative.

In fact, I am still wary of including this 'confession' of participant attraction in this thesis for fear of accusations of being unprofessional. However, I think it important to acknowledge and address these feelings as they did impact upon the research in affecting the way I conducted this participant's interviews and analysed his data. I argue that instead of contaminating the work through bias, my feelings towards him in fact strengthened and bolstered my research practices and critical insight, manifesting themselves through highly attentive listening during the actual interviews and also in a particularly thorough and exhaustive analysis of his interview transcripts. I also made a conscious effort to play the role of researcher as well as I could in his interview sessions, making sure that I presented myself as competent, confident, assured and intelligent 'as if the work were a form of courting and seduction' (Newton 1996 p. 227). In fact, my performances in this participant's interviews were undoubtedly the most proficient and skilled of the study.

I have not included this section on participant attraction as a narcissistic navel-gazing exercise, a 'kiss and tell' account, or to be purposefully controversial or provocative. Rather, I have allowed space in this chapter for this discussion in order to question the potent and pervasive attitudes in qualitative social science that researchers should not experience or acknowledge such feelings, because I can attest to their very real relevance and impact on the research process.

#### **Section 4. Data analysis**

Having collected a wealth of data, I had to determine the most appropriate means of analyzing it. Advocates of positivist paradigms of social research have typified qualitative approaches to data analysis as unsystematic, unstructured and undefined (Mays and Pope 1995). This critique stems from there being 'few formal tests of researcher judgement and few clear guides to good [qualitative] data analysis' (Crowson 1987 p. 42), and a perceived tension between being 'imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive [yet also] methodical, scholarly, and intellectually rigorous' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996 p. 10). In this section I therefore aim to demonstrate that I was not involved in 'sloppy inquiry' (Lincoln and Guba 1985 p. 225).

Although it has been argued that 'there is no single right way to analyse qualitative data' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996 p. 2), these decisions should nevertheless be reasoned and steered by the nature of the data and the aims and objectives of the research. I decided that a thematic interrogation of the interview transcripts would be the most appropriate and enlightening way of engaging with my data, as it would enable me to identify those topics and experiences that the participants held to be important, significant and meaningful in their university lives as gay students. This approach would also allow me to compare and contrast these within individual accounts and across the entire sample.

Data analysis was influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), as I wanted the interrogation of my participants' interview transcripts to lead me to my findings, assertions and conclusions. However, in accordance to my previously mentioned alignment to feminist epistemology, I concur that 'the theory and a priori assumptions a researcher adopts shape the way in which data are collected and analysed' (Rhoads 1997b p. 464), and 'the investigator's theoretical point of view does colour a study and will shape the inductive vision of reality that appears in the researcher's findings' (Crowson 1987 p. 9). Thus, following the critique of this approach's 'naïve assumption that data can initially be interrogated from a theoretically neutral position' (Davies 1999 p. 198), I was aware that 'pure' grounded theory was not possible.

As indicated by my inclusion of reflexive accounts in this chapter, I could not assume the role of detached, unbiased and objective researcher as stipulated (and celebrated) by quantitative paradigms of social inquiry (Woods 1999). Instead, I approached the

project from a particular standpoint which was informed by my personal and academic history (as detailed in my autobiography of the question in Chapter 1), and also my critique of not looking further than gay students' negative experiences within higher education (Chapter 2). Obviously, this is not to say that I analysed my participants' data with the expectation and intent to 'unearth' particular kinds of stories, or that I have included only certain types of accounts when 'writing up' the study. Making my subjectivities explicit in these ways enables an informed assessment and evaluation of the credibility of my assertions in this thesis to be made (Atkinson 1990; Coffey 1999), and indicates that my analysis was not classical grounded theory.

I began the analysis with a thorough interrogation of each participant's interview transcripts, breaking down and labelling (i.e. 'coding') the data according to emerging themes (Strauss 1987), which were then grouped and clustered according to common 'conceptually specified analytic categories' (Huberman and Miles 1994 p. 431). These broad thematic headings became refined as I re-read the transcripts and became more familiar with the data. Thus, I engaged in what Miles and Huberman (1984) term 'pattern coding', whereby data is organised into 'more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis' (p. 65). Through this coding the data was reduced or simplified into themes, yet also expanded and transformed as it was reconceptualised by me asking questions of it, linking categories, and generating and conceptualising theories (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). This constant comparative method of sifting through participants' data and examining the similarities, differences and anomalies within it enabled me to identify common and unique themes both within each participant's interviews, and across the dataset of the entire sample.

This identification and organisation of themes is illustrated in the data display diagrams I used to assist in my analysis of the interview transcripts. Built upon the notion that 'displays beget analyses' (Huberman and Miles 1994 p. 433), these presented in visual form the themes I had extracted from each participant's interviews and how they may relate to one another. The diagrams were only skeletal representations of the thematic content of each interview and lacked the subtlety, depth and comprehensiveness of a textual description. Nevertheless, they conveyed thematic information in a clear and economic way (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), made me 'think seriously and systematically about the nature of each category and its relationships with others' (Hammersley and

Atkinson 1995 p. 217), and thus were heuristic tools in organizing, de- and re-constructing the data in meaningful and insightful ways.

Deciding which themes to 'follow up' and address in this thesis was primarily based on determining which were the most useful, relevant and appropriate to answer my research questions. As this study was concerned with participants' stories and experiences, I also wanted the thesis to reflect issues that were of importance and significance to them. These were identified as being those topics commonly and frequently spoken of, and which participants were visibly engaged with during their interviews. Secondary concerns included wanting to examine a variety of ways in which participants' gayness intersected with and impacted upon their everyday lives in higher education; and to include topics that had not been extensively researched or substantively written about elsewhere, or if they had been then participants offered alternative takes to traditional or conventional accounts.

#### *Critical engagement with participants' data*

When beginning analysis I thought I was engaging with the interview transcripts at an appropriate level of scrutiny. However, a significant shift in how I approached my participants' data occurred during this stage of the research, when a discussion with one of my supervisors made me realise that I had to move beyond mere description and instead 'critically engage' with these narratives – something the following excerpt from my research journal makes clear I was reluctant to do.

*Wa-hey, yet more work. So everything my participants tell me is a lie??? Who I am to say that? I'm so sick of all this, nothing I do is good enough. OK, so I'll just make everything up, after all I'm the big PhD researcher who can really see how things are and see through their fibs. 'No Rich, I've never been beaten up cos I'm gay' = 'This participant was lying through his teeth and purposefully deceiving me just trying to present himself as having a good time as a gay student, he's too embarrassed to admit the truth'. Bulls\*\*t That's the great thing about qualitative research, you can always put your own spin on it. Why can't we just accept that what participants tell us at face value? Sociology is so subjective, it's not the place for me. Wish I had done a PhD in psychology, I'd be much*



*more comfortable and happier, after all you can't argue with numbers. Never thought I would miss SPSS<sup>28</sup>!*

As illustrated by this entry, I misinterpreted 'critically engage' as 'negatively challenge', 'expose as false' and 'pull apart', rather than assessing participants' accounts through an academically focussed, intellectually rigorous and theoretically informed lens. This incorrect assumption meant I felt that approaching participants' data in this way would be an affront to them, a personal attack, and a breach of researcher / participant trust and respect in 'seek[ing] to strip away appearance, cut through any dissembling or self-deception, to lay bare the true identity that lies beneath the surface' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997 p. 315). I was also uncomfortable questioning the interpretations and claims in their accounts, and position myself as all-knowing researcher who was able to see past their (un)conscious subterfuge to determine how things 'really are'.

However, texts by Atkinson and Silverman (1997) and Silverman (1989), which challenge the Romantic tenet of an authentic self and argue that 'there is no "discourse of truth"' (Silverman 1989 p. 42), spoke to me. I was drawn to assertions that personal accounts should not be judged or evaluated in positivist terms of an authentic or absolute 'truth', but instead acknowledge that people invest in 'lively and skilful biographical work' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997 p. 304) to construct multiple discourses of their selves, their worlds and their experiences, with each of these shifting subjectivities and multiple identifications being valid and meaningful (Silin 1999). Thus, in framing participants' data as their own interpretations of their social worlds and their experiences (or, rather, the interpretations they related in their interviews), I felt more comfortable pointing out and problematising the contradictions in the dataset, challenging participants' assumptions, and also proposing alternative explanations and re-interpretations of their narratives (ensuring of course that these readings were firmly grounded in and supported by their data). In other words, I realised that being critical of participants' data did not mean being critical of them.

I have not glossed over 'problematic' and 'difficult' data to produce smoothly polished accounts of my participants' lives. Instead, in the following chapters of this thesis I have highlighted, interrogated and explored contradictions, tensions, discrepancies and

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<sup>28</sup> SPSS – an acronym for Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, a computer software programme for quantitative data analysis.

ambiguities in order to move from description to interpretation. I have aimed to produce a detailed analysis which reflects how participants negotiated and made sense of themselves as social actors; the richness, messiness and nuances of their lived experiences at university; and the fragmentation, complexities and multiplicities of their selves and identities as gay students.

### **Conclusion**

My objective in this chapter has been to present a full and multi-faceted account of this study's methodological story, and also convey an awareness of and sensitivity to the complexities of the research process. I have detailed a comprehensive examination of and rationale for the project's research design, sampling frame, recruitment strategy, research tools, data collection and data analysis. This chapter has also provided a reflexive account of the methodological choices and decisions made to demonstrate the 'fit' between research questions and research methodology. It therefore goes beyond simply detailing how I obtained the data upon which this thesis is based.

In addition, this chapter is the basis upon which to evaluate the rigour, integrity and credibility of the study, and consequently determine the degree of confidence one can have in the findings, assertions and conclusions I present in the subsequent analytic chapters – the first of which presents participants' penpictures, and then interrogates their accounts of the intersection and impact of their sexuality in their everyday lives as gay university students.

**CHAPTER 4**  
***'RAINBOW-HUGGING QUEENS':***  
**DRAMATIS PERSONNAE, AND ROLE OF SEXUALITY**

I don't express my sexuality as they do ... they're just more actively gay ... I was going to say I feel less of a gay man but that sounds a bit strange ... I'll joke with the girls sometimes and say 'I'm a crap gay man'. (James – a participant in this study)

Having detailed the way in which this research was undertaken and some of my struggles with it in the previous chapter, I now elaborate on the people who actually took part in the study to address the question of 'who?' rather than 'how?' First I present my participants' penpictures (i.e. self-descriptions) since these 'assist the reader in "placing" the narrators to some extent' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 203). Following James' above quote, I then discuss the ways in which participants discursively presented accounts of the impact, influence and significance of their sexuality in their everyday lives as gay students at university (Section 2). This is a key theme in many of their narratives, and speaks to my second research question (as stated in Chapter 1) about the importance participants gave their gayness. The penpictures and subsequent discussion therefore provide a context within which to situate participants' data reported in the following five chapters of this thesis.

**Section 1. Participant penpictures**

In this section I present penpictures of the 17 gay male undergraduates who took part in this study. These short descriptions, written by the participants themselves, allow an understanding of the people whose data is reported in this work. The penpictures also give participants more presence in the thesis, and presenting these accounts in the main body of the text rather than an appendix indicates that their writers were integral, key figures in this research project (indeed, without them this study would be non-existent). This spatial practice therefore reflects my feminist epistemological stance, as does asking participants to write these descriptions themselves to increase their involvement in and engagement with the study (as has been discussed in Chapter 3). Participants therefore had the opportunity to present themselves in this work, rather than having voice only through my own readings of them from their data extracts. Thus, the

following penpictures provide insight into how each participant perceived himself, and what he deemed to be important in self-definition, description and presentation.

To maintain participants' intent and reduce researcher 'contamination', apart from the addition of necessary demographic information (age, nationality, year of study, degree course) I have refrained from analysing, interrogating, commenting upon or imposing my own meanings and interpretations on these penpictures and present them unvarnished. However, some of the points raised in these accounts regarding the role and influence participants said their sexuality had on their lives as gay students are deconstructed in the next section of this chapter.

*Alex* - 22 years old, non-UK<sup>29</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science<sup>30</sup> course:

I am gay but this fact is not a really important thing in my life, it doesn't control me, or my actions. My life and how I am handling it is one thing and what my sexual preferences are is another issue. I don't act according to my sexuality but according to my personality. It was just last year I was completely sure about my sexual preferences. Due to some problems I faced before coming to university my first year has been really isolated and full of loneliness and a lot of 'alone time' and this was my choice, nobody forced anything on me. Living in university halls I didn't communicate with anyone, I just wanted to be alone to think and get in touch with my inner self.

*Eli* - 20 years old, English, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

I'm a very laid-back sort of person who doesn't like to make a drama out of things. I can be quite quiet and shy when first meeting people, but I'm very sociable with friends I know well. My tastes in music/film etc. are pretty far removed from the gay stereotype and, since I'm naturally straight-acting and not interested in the gay scene, people generally assume me to be a straight man. As a rule, I don't go out of my way to correct people on their assumption unless they ask me directly about relationships - I want to be defined by my personality and tastes, rather than by the gender I'm attracted to.

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<sup>29</sup> I do not specify nationality for reasons of anonymity.

<sup>30</sup> I do not specify degree subject for reasons of anonymity. However, under humanities and social science I group architecture, criminology, English literature, history, law, politics, religious studies and sociology.

**Harry** - 21 years old, English, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

I'm originally from the Home Counties. Having attended boarding school I didn't find university as daunting as some of my peers and I never saw my sexuality as an issue. I'm an open person but I'm not exactly forthcoming about my sexuality. If I'm asked directly about it I always answer honestly but I see it as only a small fragment of my personality and character, not a defining aspect. My friends, both from home and university, are straight and I have never really been involved in gay culture.

**Jack** - 19 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

Being at this university has been the best breath of fresh air I could have wished for. It has made me into a far more rounded individual, and also has allowed me to appreciate that generally speaking the world is a very accepting place. Ignoring the odd social reprobate, homophobia is generally blown out of proportion and this is definitely the case here. The times I've had this first year I will remember for the rest of my life as they have certainly proved to be the happiest. At the risk of sounding a rainbow-hugging queen, this university has allowed me to be who I want to be without fear.

**Jake** - 21 years old, English, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

I would describe myself as a 'straight acting' gay man. I come from a small town in North Wales and am 'out' to all friends and family. I don't take much interest in the gay scene but I do have a number of gay friends, both at home and at university. I am also an avid Manchester City fan, which somewhat goes against the traditional gay stereotype!

**James** - 22 years old, English, 2<sup>nd</sup> year of biological science course:

I would consider myself to be a character of two halves - one half is centered on work and is very serious, and the other side of my character that is released when I get time off compensates drastically by being a little hyper and sometimes verges on madness. I love to socialise and am proud of my diverse group of friends who all have vastly different interests and outlooks, but all complement each other at the same time. I would definitely not consider myself to be typically gay acting, by which I mean most people do not realise I am gay unless they are told. This is not a conscious decision and I am certainly not ashamed of my sexuality, but at the same time I do not like to broadcast it. I do

occasionally go out on the 'gay scene' and I do enjoy it. However, sometimes I can feel more uncomfortable in this environment than I do in a 'straight' club. I am at my happiest with my close friends and my partner, either casually enjoying a meal together or going out drinking and dancing at a club or gig. I am very happy with my life and look forward to whatever tomorrow brings.

**Matthew** - 19 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

I came out when I was 15 to friends and a year later to my parents. In that time I've become rather confident about who I am and my sexuality. I would say I'm outgoing, and enjoy going out, mostly on the gay scene. I am a committee member of our LGBT Society and often find myself talking to people about their sexuality and trying to help them come to terms with this. Apart from all this I enjoy reading, watching television, socialising and so on.

**Noah** - 19 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

Originally from Brighton, I had no problems on the whole with coming to terms with my sexuality. From the ages of 16 to 18 I was in a monogamous relationship and this taught me an awful lot about myself and how I wanted to address my sexuality. Now single, I enjoy clubbing in both gay and straight clubs and am very meticulous when it comes to allowing others to pursue a sexual relationship with me. While I feel my sexuality is an important part of my identity, I do not feel it is the central focus of who I am.

**Ollie** - 23 years old, Welsh, 2<sup>nd</sup> year of language course:

I suppose I'm your average 23 year old guy. Well, I consider myself average. If, however, one chooses to stick to societal norms and values, I'd have to throw myself into a minority group and whack a label on me - I'm a 23 year old gay man. I don't mind labelling myself as such, after all, that's what I am. In all honesty though, I don't like defining people into such categories. I don't like stuffing people into boxes with straight forward, no-questions-asked labels on the front. I'm fortunate enough to finally be comfortable with my sexuality, with who I am, and what my sexuality is. Coming out when I was 15, I've made it through the rough times, and with amazing family support, evolving into the bloke I am today. I love art (I'm a postmodern kind of guy), Renaissance literature, Classical music, and never feel pressured into covering up what many

would see as characteristically feminine interests. I like what I like, regardless of gender or sexuality. I have a wide circle of friends: British, Caribbean, Filipino, Chinese, Indian, European, transsexual, transgender, bisexual, polysexual, homosexual, heterosexual, and not to mention those who haven't made up their minds. Admittedly, I'm one of the lucky ones. Indeed, there was a time when I felt different - I felt a sicko, a weirdo, a freak, a social leper. But I made it through and now feel comfortable, happy, proud, and above all, unique. I am me: nothing more, nothing less. Me.

**Simon** - 21 years old, Welsh, 2<sup>nd</sup> year of biological science course:

I say things before thinking which gets me in trouble and I usually regret them. I don't like making mistakes but am usually quite relaxed and easy going.

**Toby** - 20 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

I enjoy an active social life on and off the scene, and my group of friends reflects this mix. Although out to everyone, I feel there is much more to me than my sexuality. I would not identify myself as a stereotypical 'camp' gay man. I am comfortable with my sexuality and personality as a whole, and can confidently express this side of myself if I choose to do so.

**Todd** - 19 years old, Welsh, 2<sup>nd</sup> year of humanities and social science course:

Most people describe me as a confident, happy and career-driven person which I think is a fairly accurate description. Although I spend a lot of my time on the gay scene, I'm not obsessed with it and don't let it rule my life, although I'm very comfortable with my identity as a gay man.

**Will** - 20 years old, English, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of biological science course:

I have been openly gay since I was 15 years old, and have been in a relationship for five years now. I consider myself to be outgoing, but don't like being referred to as 'camp'. Although I don't mind going out to 'gay' clubs, I am more than happy to just go out with my friends anywhere, and don't feel the need to be in a place that has declared itself to be 'gay-friendly' to be comfortable. I am entirely open about my sexuality with everybody, but I do not like being defined by it - I would hate

for people to describe me first as 'that gay guy', and would much rather be known for other sides of my personality.

Feedback from the study indicated that participants enjoyed writing these penpictures, perhaps because the task provided the empowering opportunity for their own voices to be heard, and also because they were contributing something 'concrete' to the project that would definitely have a place in the thesis. However, as an illustrative example of power relations in research contexts not always being in favour of the researcher (as discussed in the previous chapter), not all participants provided self-descriptions or responded to 'chase up' e-mails, even though I had told them that I needed them to do this exercise. Those participants who did not write a penpicture are listed below with basic demographic information *in lieu* of their missing data.

**Andrew** – 19 years old, non-UK<sup>31</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup> year of humanities and social science course.

**Ben** - 19 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of biological science course.

**Daniel** - 21 years old, English, 4<sup>th</sup> year of language course.

**Vivian** - 19 years old, English, 1<sup>st</sup> year of biological science course.

## Section 2. Role of sexuality

I suppose [my sexuality] is quite a big part of my life, but it doesn't solely revolve around being gay. (Toby)

I've found that with everybody it has always been a bigger issue than it is for me. (James)

One of the most significant themes to emerge from this study, which has already been flagged up in James' opening quote to this chapter and many of the penpictures cited above, is participants' downplaying of any significant role, influence and impact their sexuality may have on their lives and experiences at university. Although the ways in which participants presented their gayness as unimportant and unremarkable are

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<sup>31</sup> I do not specify nationality for reasons of anonymity.



addressed in the following chapters, such was the frequency with which these practices were used by almost all the sample and their reoccurrence throughout the interviews that I draw singular attention to them here. This initial analysis adds to the descriptions of my participants already detailed in their penpictures. Furthermore, in contrast to queer theory which sees sexuality as being 'a constitutive element of social life' (Pascoe 2007 p. 332) and key to how the self is organised and governed (Sedgwick 1990), this discussion is an early indication that participants' accounts of their lived experiences as gay students do not map neatly on to hegemonic narratives, thus opening up the possibility of 'new' stories being told in this study.

Participants drew upon a number of discursive strategies, as detailed below, to achieve a balance between acknowledging the presence of their sexuality and also diminishing, containing and negating any influence it might actually have on their higher education experiences. In using these strategies, both individually and together, participants attempted to distance themselves from any effects of their gayness on their lives at university. The extracts in this section are therefore examples of my participants working to present themselves 'as autonomous, unitary, rational actors with capacities for control and with responsibilities for our own destinies' (Stephenson 2003 p. 137), and as 'active participants in their lives ... actively thinking, wanting, feeling and doing' (Rose 1999 p. 10). In not wanting to be viewed as being controlled by their sexuality, participants emphasised subjectivity and self-determination when constructing their gay student biographies. Thus, they presented narratives of the self in which they inhabited the position of neoliberal subjects (Fitzsimons 2002; Walkerdine 2003).

As the neoliberal self is expected to be 'autonomous and flexible to negotiate [and] choose' (Walkerdine 2003 p. 240), I highlight participants' reports of being shapers of their higher education experiences uninfluenced by their sexuality. One of the ways many diluted the importance and significance they ascribed their gayness, and its influence in their lives both inside and outside university, was to present it as just a singular part of a multi-faceted self.

I think it is a big part of my identity but it's not the sole part of my identity. (Daniel)

I wouldn't say [my sexuality plays] a very big [part] in that there's so much more of me that contributes to making me me. (Ollie)

Some participants coupled this discursive strategy with others to further emphasise the unimportance and insignificance they ascribed their sexuality.

Obviously it's an important factor because it's a part of my life ... It's not a minor part of my life but it's only a fraction of who I actually am, it's only a fraction of my identity ... It's not my absolute core you know ... It's not something that is central to me. (Noah)

I think there are other aspects of my personality or my identity that are more important than [my sexuality]. (Todd)

It's just another thing about me... To me it's just like another part ... It's not the be all and end all. (Jake)

In the excerpt above, Noah framed his gayness as part of his identity, and in locating it away from the centre and on the periphery of the self, he eased the tension between acknowledging yet also negating his sexuality. Todd and Jake also said that their gayness was just one part of their identity, and in framing it as not a particularly potent or influential component (Todd positioned other identities above his gayness), they further downplayed the role, influence and significance of their sexuality.

Another means by which some participants limited the influence and meaning of their sexuality was to assert that gayness had little effect or influence on their lived experiences other than determining which gender they were sexually attracted to. For example, in stating '*really, being gay is just your sexuality, it's who you have sex with*', Daniel reduced the role of his gayness to purely biological and sexual dimensions, and further constrained it to this narrow definition by adding '*that's all it is really, physically*'. Andrew similarly said '*It's just your sexual preference*'. These accounts parallel those of Valentine and Sporton's (2009) young Somali participants who did not claim a black identity 'because it was not an identity that was emotionally or politically salient for them. Rather, blackness was dismissed as just skin colour' (pp. 738-739). Just as these people disavowed a black identity, so my participants here discursively worked to disavow a gay one.

Other participants utilised similar phrases to restrict and isolate the meaning and effects of their gayness purely to sexual attraction, and thus assist in reducing (although not completely alleviating) the tension between acknowledging that their gayness was part of their identity yet minimising its actual significance and influence. I highlight such narrative containment in the excerpts below through the addition of italics. This data demonstrates how, by confining their sexuality solely to same-sex attraction, some participants ascribed themselves increased agency and self-management in shaping their lives at university.

I don't think [my sexuality] means anything to me. *It doesn't affect anything...* It's just a really small bit of my life ... I don't think that because I like men affects so many things. *OK I like men, so what?* (Alex)

In my head it's as simple as I'm gay, *that's more or less all there is to it really*. I like other guys, it doesn't have to be and it's not the dominant part of my personality. (Ben)

The fact that I'm gay, *it just means* that when I go out on a Friday night I go to the gay bars and if I'm looking for a partner [then] I fancy men, I don't fancy women. (Ollie)

*The only thing you can define it on* is sexual preference ... As far as me being gay is having a relationship with a man, *that's where it ends really*. (James)

In addition to the above, participants employed further strategies to present and emphasise their sexuality as insignificant and unimportant. These practices included cataloguing those university decisions and experiences that had not been influenced or impacted upon by their gayness.

It hasn't really played a huge part in my life to be honest since I've been here [at university] ... I don't really think it really played a part in kind of how I felt or how I socialised or how I got on with other people ... It hasn't played a very large role at all in where I've chosen to live or who I've chosen to live with or how comfortable I've been living there. (Eli)

I didn't pick the university or my course for the fact that I was gay. I didn't pick my accommodation for reasons that I was gay. Apart from my personal life it doesn't really have an influence on me whatsoever. (Harry)

The forcefulness of Harry's categorical and unqualified dismissal of any bleeding of his sexuality into areas of his life other than the '*personal*' is particularly notable, and alludes to a strong desire to construct and present a narrative of the self in which his sexuality was limited to a single role.

Jake utilised an interesting non-verbal strategy of promoting his alternative social identity of football fan to convey how little significance, importance and prominence he gave his gayness. In stating '*I'm always more concerned with making the point that I'm a City fan [and] well I'm gay as well by the way*', he explicitly situated his sexuality as secondary to his identity as football supporter. Furthermore, in decorating his car with football memorabilia ('*My car is covered in City [Football Club] stuff*'), Jake actively encouraged being defined, labelled and known by / for his football fanaticism rather than his gayness. Such self-identification was also neatly demonstrated through his spatial production of his bedroom (as captured in the photos he took for this study), which was dominated by the football club's flag which covered most of one wall, next to which he had placed a small picture from the film *Brokeback Mountain*. Jake expressed his awareness that these items and their respective sizes and organisation within this space were physical representations of the different degrees of importance and significance he ascribed to these aspects of his identity.

[The *Brokeback Mountain* picture is] the only thing in my bedroom that says I'm gay ... That's the only thing, that one little A4 picture ... That's the centrepiece of my whole bedroom, the big [Manchester City Football club] flag. Not a big rainbow flag or anything but a big union jack with the big crest. (Jake)

Also apparent in some participants' accounts were frequent and strongly-voiced assertions that any reflections of their sexuality were coincidental and unintentional. Following Jake's extract above, this discursive strategy was most evident when discussing spatial indications of their gayness in their student accommodation. When talking about the photographs they had taken of these spaces, I asked participants if there was anything in their rooms which reflected their sexuality. The markers they identified

ranged from the explicit and transparent to the coded and opaque, depending on the extent to which they were recognisably related to non-heterosexuality. However, unlike the gays and lesbians in studies by Elwood (2000), Gorman-Murray (2008), Rowlands and Gurney (2001) and Valentine et al. (2003), participants stated that they did not have these gay signifiers present in their accommodation for reasons related to their identity or sexuality. As detailed below, they used various discursive strategies to downplay, distance and sever any influence their gayness may have actually had on how they had produced these spaces.

Some participants dismissed queer readings of their accommodation by arguing that although they had been able to identify objects that reflected their sexuality readily, they themselves did not read, interpret or relate to them as such. Rather, they proposed reasons unrelated to their gayness for allocating such items space in their bedrooms. Toby said he had gay-themed DVDs and books because of their artistic merit and entertainment value; Ollie had flowers because *'they're pretty and it makes my room feel more alive [and] nice and homely'*, pink fairy lights because *'they go with my flowers'* and a feather boa because it reminded him of an enjoyable time at Mardi Gras; Todd had a painting of a male torso on his wall because it had been a birthday gift from a friend and was *'art'*; and Vivian had the freedom flag poster on his bathroom door because *'it'd be a nice poster to stick up, you know the rainbow'*.

These participants therefore claimed that it was secondary and even coincidental that they had allowed objects which could be read as relating to and reflecting their sexuality space in their accommodation. Distinguishing sexuality from personal taste, and asserting that they had spatially organised and produced their accommodation according to the latter, can be understood as further strategies participants used to downplay and negate any influence and impact of sexuality in their lives as gay students. Thus, this was another way in which these participants inhabited the position of neoliberal subjects.

Some participants, however, acknowledged that their sexuality did influence their lives as gay students, although such admissions were grudgingly made. Apparent in Todd and Vivian's excerpts below are the difficulties and discomfort participants experienced of wanting to position their sexuality on the outskirts of self and identity, yet conceding that it nevertheless did have some impact on their choices and experiences.

I do generally just go to gay clubs if I'm going out, and most of my friends are gay. But then I've got straight friends too.  
(Todd)

During the daytime I don't say it affects me at all ... I act like any normal person really during the daytime, being gay doesn't have any weight on what I do or friends I have or where I go in the day. Only at night time, I'd much rather go to a gay place.  
(Vivian)

Todd identified his gayness as influencing the places he chose to socialise and the people he selected as friends. However, after saying that he usually frequented gay rather than straight spaces, and that the majority of the people he was friends with were gay rather than heterosexual, he utilised a diminishment strategy in asserting that *'but then I've got straight friends too'*. Vivian also said that being gay had an effect on the places he socialised, but he temporally confined its influence (*'During the daytime I don't say it affects me at all ... only at night time'*). Both participants therefore immediately undertook discursive repair work after these references to the influence of their sexuality, thus qualifying its weight and significance, and repositioning it as a minor factor in their lives.

Just as some participants were keen to emphasise that their sexuality was but a part – and often a minor or non-influential part – of their identity, so they disliked, distanced and differentiated themselves from those people who did shape, mould and centre their lives around their gayness. For example, Todd noted *'I think a lot of gay people are kind of obsessed with being gay and let it kind of rule their identity'*, and James stated *'The issue sometimes I have with the 'gay community' or however you want to call it is when they make gay the central issue of their lives'*. Daniel similarly critiqued gay people who restricted themselves only to issues and concerns relating to their (non-hetero)sexuality, stating *'You could talk about gay rights [in class]. But I think that's just so cliché'*. Furthermore, by saying *'I just don't want to do that'* (to which can be added Will's assertion *'I just don't want to be a part of that'*), he actively sought to distinguish and locate himself away from those who did make their gayness an integral and key aspect of their identity.

In contrast, as detailed in the opening quote to this chapter, James interestingly spoke of feeling he was somehow lacking in not making his gayness a central, meaningful, and influential part of his life. In stating *'I feel less of a gay man ... I'll joke with the girls sometimes and say "I'm a crap gay man"'*, he inferred there was an obligation to present an identifiable gay persona and build his life around his non-heterosexuality, which he would or could not meet. This pressure to ascribe gayness significance and prominence mirrors the political tenets of gay liberation movements of the 1970s who strongly encouraged and urged the claiming of an 'out and proud' public gay identity to disrupt and challenge heteronormativity. Some participants (above) critiqued and distanced themselves from gay people who constructed their identities around their non-heterosexuality. James, however, presented an alternative perspective in expressing disempowerment and perhaps guilt for not doing so.

Members of the student LGBT Society were identified as examples of people for whom non-heterosexuality was *'something which is a lifestyle and not just part of their life'* (Harry), with participants describing them as *'very sort of full-on'* (James) and *'people who really are just gay'* (Will). It is therefore interesting to examine Matthew's account of how he frames his sexuality, considering his position as a committee member of the Society.

There's a film – *Broken Hearts Club* ... Basically there's a character in that and all he does is witter on about gay this, gay that, gay the other. Gay film, gay literature, being gay. It's just everything is about being gay. And I don't want to be that type of person. (Matthew)

Matthew ascribes his gayness some role and importance in his university life, demonstrating a significant and deliberate engagement with it on both social and cultural levels. For example, he is not simply a member of the LGBT Society, but holds a position on the committee. This was a post he had to apply for, and be elected to. Also, in mentioning the film *Broken Hearts Club* he demonstrates awareness of and engagement with gay media beyond the mainstream of, for example, *Brokeback Mountain* or *Beautiful Thing*. There is a difference between being seen and defined exclusively in terms of being gay, and gayness being an important (but not the only) part of one's identity. However, Matthew's assertion that he does not want to be defined primarily by his sexuality (which, as has been illustrated above, is a desire of many other

participants) does not sit easily alongside him holding a visible and authoritative role in the LGBT Society, and having more than a superficial knowledge of gay media. In detailing how big a role his gayness plays in his university life, and how he wants it to be perceived as only part of his identity, Matthew positions himself as a gay student in a seemingly contradictory way.

As another example of the 'messiness' of participants' data, most of the above narratives convey a sample for whom sexuality is positioned as a part of themselves, but which had marginal (if any) influence on their lives and experiences as students at university. This chapter therefore raises the interesting question of why, if participants engaged and invested so heavily in downplaying and dismissing their sexuality, they had volunteered to take part in a research project which focussed on and brought this aspect of their identity to the fore.

Throughout the following chapters of this thesis I flag up the contradictions between participants undertaking the various discursive work detailed in the chapter to downplay and de-centre their sexuality, and their reports of the role and influence it actually plays in their everyday lives as gay students at university. Thus, in Chapter 5 I note that some participants deliberately based their decisions of which universities to attend and not attend on the extent to which the intuitions and their locales were perceived to offer them the freedom to address, explore and express their gayness. In Chapter 6 I detail how some participants made their sexuality the focus of their selves in assuming the role of teacher to 'educate' their flatmates on issues surrounding gayness. In Chapter 7 I highlight that one reason some participants gave for coming out to their flatmates was because their sexuality was an important and significant part of themselves, and so they felt it necessary to disclose their gayness for these people to know who they really were. Furthermore, in Chapter 8 I interrogate how and why some participants deliberately made their gayness exaggeratedly visible through 'camping it up'.

How participants viewed and articulated the importance, significance and influence of their sexuality, in terms of identity and experiences, was therefore dynamic. Their accounts support theories of identity as 'a plurality of forms of selfhood' (Rose 1999 p. 11) in being 'never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall 1996 p. 4). Such shifts in



presentation of the self are apparent in the contradictions highlighted throughout this thesis between participants' accounts of the role, potency and intersection of their gayness in their lives as gay students. This fluidity has required a nuanced analysis of their data to capture the changes in their self-identification and presentation. However, highlighting and deconstructing such inconsistencies, tensions and complexities assist me in presenting these participants as 'real' people.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have addressed how participants conceptualised their sexuality, and identified and interrogated the various discursive strategies they utilised in producing narratives of the self. Most of these accounts stressed that sexuality was but part of a fragmented and multi-faceted identity, and also affirmed and presented it as having a minimal and unimportant influence on their everyday lives as gay students. Being able to tease out and identify these various strategies indicates their commonality across the sample, and how strong the desire was to discursively contain the influence of their sexuality and frame it as unremarkable.

Participants emphatically located themselves away from narratives of gay dominance where (non-hetero)sexuality is of primary concern and paramount importance, has potent and wide-ranging influence on many (if not all) aspects of life, and dictates choices and decisions. I have suggested that in marginalising, diluting and decentring their sexuality in the various ways described in this chapter, participants presented themselves as conducting their lives at university free from any significant influence of their sexuality.

I further this neoliberal argument in the subsequent chapters of the thesis, in which I highlight participants' self-reports of being active and independent shapers of their higher education experiences. These accounts of participants deciding how to frame and negotiate their relationships with flatmates (Chapter 6), come out to these people (Chapter 7), and conduct themselves physically in both university and non-university spaces (Chapter 8), locate my sample away from the disempowering and passive martyr-target-victim framework. Instead, they relate participants making considered decisions, and behaving in particular and strategic ways, so as to live out their gayness as they want at university. This is particularly apparent in the next chapter where I discuss

participants' university choices, and the influence of their gayness on these decisions of which institution to attend / not attend.

## CHAPTER 5

### QUEER DECISIONS? GAY MALE STUDENTS' UNIVERSITY CHOICES<sup>32</sup>

University choice 'is more than simply an "academic" question'. (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 127)

Having presented my participants in the previous chapter through their self-descriptions, I now address the intersection of their gayness and higher education experiences. In this chapter I explore the reported influences on, and the stories behind, the first of their university decisions – namely, which institution to attend. I focus particularly on how (non-hetero)sexuality intersects with and impacts upon this process, and continue the discussion from the previous chapter on the role and potency participants ascribe (or do not ascribe) their gayness in their selections.

The first section of this chapter contextualises the topic of university choice by reviewing the sizeable literature on the subject. Section 2 addresses the issue of class, which I argue is key to these decisions as it determines where students are able, are expected, and are drawn to study. Section 3 concerns spatial displacement in examining migration in participants' accounts, in terms of both moves from and moves towards particular spaces. Interrogation of this data furthers and enriches understanding of my participants through their often vivid and evocative accounts of their home lives and communities. Analysis also suggests that their decisions of which university to attend were influenced by their (non-hetero)sexuality, albeit to different extents.

#### Section 1. Contextualising university choice

Choosing which university to attend has been described as 'a great and complex decision for a student' (Raposo and Alves 2007 p. 2), and a large body of literature has identified and deconstructed the 'matrix of influences' (Reay et al. 2001a [online]) that mediate and inform these decisions (e.g. Moogan et al. 1999; Shanka et al. 2005). The factors impacting upon higher education selection have been described as 'numerous, with many variables interacting in complex ways' (Whitehead et al. 2006 p. 8). Furthermore,

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<sup>32</sup> Parts of this chapter have been adapted into a paper to be published in *Studies in Higher Education* (forthcoming).

as stated in Epstein et al.'s (2003) opening quote to this chapter, these are not restricted to academic matters.

Determinants on university choice reportedly include institutional characteristics such as the campus atmosphere (whether noisy or quiet, bustling or relaxed), type of university (whether old / traditional or new / modern) (Soutar and Turner 2002), and the institution's infrastructure (Veloutsou et al. 2004). Other considerations are the availability of a particular degree or subject, the course content, the reputation of the institution and department, and job prospects following graduation (Moogan et al. 1999). Recommendations from school teachers, careers advisors, family, friends and both current and past students may also influence decisions of where to study (Brooks 2003). Furthermore, as similar factors have been reported in earlier studies on university choice (e.g. Anderson 1976; Campbell 1977; Saunders et al. 1978) and also in contemporary projects undertaken in different countries such as Portugal (Raposo and Alves 2007), Australia (Soutar and Turner 2002), New Zealand (Holdsworth and Nind 2006), Canada (Drewes and Michael 2006) and Scotland (Briggs 2006), these influences do appear to be both temporally and spatially consistent.

However, a number of methodological qualifications regarding the above studies should be noted. Most are purely quantitative (e.g. Briggs 2006; Drewes and Michael 2006; Soutar and Turner 2002), utilising statistical analysis and regression models to rank reported influences. The lack of qualitative inquiry means that it cannot be ascertained how, why and in what ways any of these factors are actually meaningful and of significance to the participants in their decisions, and subsequently that any conclusions drawn from such league tables are inferred only by the researcher. There are also sample considerations, particularly in whether studies examine prospective students' decision-making processes as they occur, or retrospectively ask current students what influenced their university choices. People who applied to institutions but were not accepted will not be accounted for in research on the latter population. Furthermore, any project which utilises memory work in reflecting on past choices and experiences requires an acknowledgement and understanding that participants' responses will be coloured and framed by their current life positions.

Differences in type and status of student have also been reported to impact upon university decisions (Poock and Love 2001). Veloutsou et al. (2004) note that higher education institutions must attract and appeal to what they term the ‘three broad market segments’ (p. 162) of school leavers, mature students and international students, each of which has different concerns and priorities, and hence different criteria in determining their university preferences (Christie et al. 2005). Similarly, the influences on graduate students’ higher education choices have been reported to be different to those of undergraduates (Poock and Love 2001), as are those of international and home students (Davey 2005; Maringe and Carter 2007).

In addition, many of the above studies are based only on data from a particular type of student – i.e. white, undergraduate, and studying at an institution in their home country but living away from family. They typically do not address how the previously mentioned social and cultural ‘differences that make a difference’ (Chapter 3) such as gender, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity may mediate and differentiate students’ decisions about which institutions to attend and not attend (exceptions being Ball et al. 2002b; Christie 2007; Hutchings and Archer 2001). Unpacking the university choice process is made complex by these factors interrelating, as illustrated in ethnic-minority, working-class students’ accounts of their decisions (Ball et al. 2002a; Reay et al. 2001b). However, the ways that the ‘difference’ of (non-hetero)sexuality may shape gay students’ choices of where to study has not been substantively addressed.

In fact, I am aware of only one study that has touched upon the intersection of gayness and university selection, as reported by Telford in Epstein et al. (2003 chapters 6 and 7). He noted that his gay male participants wanted to move away from domestic spaces where their sexuality was undisclosed or treated as an open secret, and which they therefore experienced as restrictive and claustrophobic, towards institutions and locales that were perceived as gay tolerant and supportive. Telford’s participants were also drawn towards places where they could build gay social networks and no longer have to work hard on finding ways to live out their gay identities clandestinely. As such, they applied to universities with active gay student communities and nearby large gay scenes.

In this chapter I build upon Telford's work, and especially his findings on the importance of geographies and journeys in his participants' decisions of which institution to attend, to interrogate whether and how my participants' sexuality impacted upon their university choices.

## **Section 2. Class**

Reay et al. (2001b) argue that 'the [university] choice-making of the middle-class and working-class students are very different' (p. 871), with distinctions being noted in the extent to which selections are informed, finance is a consideration, and spatial migration away from home is restricted (Ball et al. 2002b). Therefore, before discussing the factors my participants reported to influence their university choices and how their sexuality mediated these decisions, it is necessary firstly to contextualise both them and their data by addressing this additional 'difference that makes a difference'.

I did not explicitly address the issue of class when interviewing participants. However, inferences about their status can be made from their verbal data, and also the photographs they had taken of their student accommodation. In these instances I equate affluence and cultural habitus with class positioning. Although there is a degree of slippage in that class status may not always correspond to financial capital or feelings of 'fitting in' with one's surroundings, these nevertheless serve as broad indicators of class identity.

Participants often spoke of parental employment status and comfortable financial capital of both parents and self in their interviews. For example, Noah had taken a gap year to go travelling before coming to university; Vivian had attended a private 6<sup>th</sup> form college, mentioned a family cruise that was being organised for his father's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, could afford £300 from his own savings to pay for a window he broke when he was drunk, and had many expensive designer clothes including a £220 Vivian Westwood belt; Simon talked of his forthcoming holiday to Canada and the US; Harry had attended boarding school, his mother sat on the hospital board, and his father worked abroad; and Jack's father was a school governor and worked for the local council.

Class-based assumptions about my participants could also be made from the possessions they had brought with them to university, as presented in the photographs they had taken of their student accommodation as part of this study. All had laptops, many of which were top of the range or the latest models. Most also had printers and speakers attached to these. Other items included televisions, DVD and video players, games consoles, stereos, digital cameras and i-pods, in addition to many CDs and DVDs. Furthermore, Matthew had both a laptop and a desktop computer in his room, he and Vivian had lots of expensive cosmetics, and Will and Jake had large music keyboards. The financial information presented in the interviews as reported above, and the presence of so many expensive material possessions, strongly suggested that most (if not all) of my participants were middle-class.

Perhaps the greatest indication of their class status was that all were studying away from their family homes. It has been noted that accounts of working class students' university selection processes are often 'saturated with a localism that [is] absent from the narratives of more economically privileged students' (Reay et al. 2001b p. 861), and that 'for many students, "going away" to study is not an option' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 128). The class backgrounds and family financial situations of some of Telford's participants, for example, meant it was not feasible for them to move away from home to attend university, which thereby restricted their options of which institutions to attend. However, studying away from home is a (middle-)class-based assumption and expectation of the normative student biography (Ball et al. 2002b; Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). Indeed, 'amongst the middle classes, having a child move away from home to study is part of the "natural order"' (Christie 2007 p. 2458). Such is the potency of this narrative that even though the increasing financial costs of studying at university means there is a growing trend for students to stay at home and attend a local institution, moving away remains the expected higher education pathway for middle-class students (Christie 2007). My participants had significantly more 'degrees of choice' (Reay et al. 2001b p. 860) than Telford's, being in the advantageous position of being able to draw upon their middle-class capital and resources to choose to study away. Their geographic freedom and spatial mobility were apparent from their lists of which institutions they had applied to, and the distance of these from their home communities. Class dimensions therefore have to be acknowledged and considered when addressing students' living arrangements whilst studying for a degree.

In addition to my participants being able and being expected to base their university choices on studying away from home, a further indication of their class position was their decision to study at an elite institution (which I have described in Chapter 3). A number of studies have reported that students select institutions they perceive and / or experience as offering a sense of belonging (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Read et al. 2003). For example, some students do not apply to universities they think they will not fit in classwise (Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Hutchings and Archer 2001), seeking 'a class fit between the habitus of home and institution' (Ball and Vincent 2001 p. 186). The working-class students in Reay et al.'s (2001b) study, for example, based their university choices upon wanting to go where there would be similar people 'like me' (p. 865), and deliberately refrained from applying to elite universities, stating 'What's a person like me going to do at a place like that?' (p. 864). It has been reported that some ethnic minority and mature students also base their selections on a similar matching judgment process and criteria (Ball et al. 2002b; Murphy and Fleming 2000).

A recent article in *The Guardian* (Shepherd 2009) detailed a study confirming such a class dimension to higher education selection. The research proposed that students from the wealthiest homes were overrepresented at Russell Group institutions, whilst only a small percentage of the student bodies at these universities were from poorer backgrounds. In accordance to the above studies, data indicated that students from families on lower incomes tend to discount applying to elite institutions because they think they will not assimilate there classwise. Therefore, in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, in deciding which university to attend, it appears that some students engage in an evaluation of seeking congruity between habitus (themselves) and field (their surroundings). This may explain why elite universities 'remain overwhelmingly white and middle-class in composition' (Reay et al. 2001b p. 858).

Some of my participants based their university choices on such feelings of 'fitting in' with the institution, which Harry, Jack and Matthew experienced when attending open days. These events have been reported to be highly important in influencing students' higher education decisions (Moogan et al. 1999) as they provide a 'real life' experience of the university which cannot be gleaned from a brochure or prospectus.



I came here to the opening days and immediately, from literally as soon as arriving, I liked the atmosphere, I enjoyed the introductory lectures, the people that I was being shown around in tours ... Everyone just seemed really nice. (Harry)

Harry noted the ambience of the university, liking the people there, and enjoying his 'tasters' of academic life, as appealing to him. Attending the open day meant that he would have seen the listed buildings which constitute the institution, and the parks and greenery which surround the campus. Considering his (inferred) middle-class habitus, these may have spoken to him (and consequently encouraged his application to this particular university) in ways that the environment of a post-1992 institution may have not.

Also apparent in Harry's extract is the definite and immediate recognition that this was the right university for him, a feeling he said he experienced '*literally as soon as arriving*'. This emotive dimension to university selection was also present in Jack and Matthew's accounts.

I just came for an open day and it was just a general feeling I got, I kind of thought this was the university for me. (Jack)

I just sort of decided here was the place for me. (Matthew)

These reports of compatibility parallel those of a participant in Reay et al.'s (2001b) study on university choice who stated 'I just liked the feel, you know, when you walk in somewhere and I think, I could be happy here' (p. 865). Jack and Matthew's sense of 'fitting in' with the institution was based upon their feelings that this particular university was the one *for me*. Although they obviously could not foresee what their student experiences there would actually be, they nevertheless perceived a strong match between self and institution. In fact, Harry, Jack and Matthew's extracts are evocative of narratives of romance, there not just being an immediate and powerful attraction to this university, but also the recognition and self-belief that this was the one and only institution for them.

In addition to these undefined but potent gut-feelings and emotive reactions, participants also reported more rational and practical reasons for their university choices. For example, degree subject availability was a pragmatic factor in many of their decisions,

and one which may be a concern for all students regardless of their sexuality. As detailed on the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) website ([www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)), certain courses such as biochemistry, English literature and mathematics are offered by many of the universities in the UK (seventy four, seventy eight and ninety four institutions respectively). However, some degree subjects are only available at a handful of institutions, such as Viking studies (four universities), tropical disease biology (one university) and cosmetic science (one university). As previously detailed in Chapter 4, participants were enrolled on a variety of degree schemes. Although some of these could be deemed 'core' or 'traditional' in that they were run at many (if not most) institutions in the UK (e.g. English literature, French, chemistry), other subjects or subject combinations were less commonly available. For example, Simon and Daniel stated respectively '*Not many unis do Microbiology*' and '*It was just like oh yeah they do German and Spanish, I'll go there*'. These participants' options of where to study were therefore restricted by the smaller number of universities offering the particular courses they wanted to follow.

As in other studies on higher education choices (e.g. Lin 1997; Soutar and Turner 2002), and again unconnected to sexuality, academic reputation was identified as a consideration for some participants. They said '*It was high in the rankings of the general UK universities*' (Alex), '*It was on top of one of the lists for architecture, it's one of the best*' (Andrew) and '*It's very good for Law to begin with, when I applied they were [high] in The Times Law pages*' (Jack). In consulting university and departmental rankings and league tables, participants demonstrated an awareness of 'prestige hierarchies' (Christie 2007 p. 2453) within the UK higher education system. Founding university choice upon such informed judgment and knowledge has been identified as a salient and telling feature of middle-class students' decision-making processes, and one which distinguishes them from their working-class peers (Ball et al. 2002a; Ball et al. 2002b). Jack's choice of newspaper was a further indication of a class-based dimension to university selection, and reflected the institution's predominantly middle-class student intake.

Class therefore played an integral part in some of my participants' university selection, not only in how they went about the process in terms of researching the institutions to inform their decisions, but also in their expectation of moving away to study, their

ability to do so, their geographic freedom which equated to wide degrees of choice, and their applications to elite institutions. As such, although the primary focus of this chapter is the role of participants' sexuality in their decisions of which university to attend, this process cannot be disassociated from the assumptions of, and the opportunities afforded by, their (middle-)class status.

### Section 3. Migration

The influence of participants' sexuality on their university choices was most apparent in their stories of geographic displacement from their family homes and communities – both in terms of moves *from* these spaces which were viewed or experienced as gay intolerant and therefore repressive, and / or moves *towards* an environment (be it a specific university or its locale) perceived as being gay friendly, supportive and accepting. These 'mobility decisions' (Christie 2007 p. 2445) were a highly significant characteristic of many participants' university choice accounts and, in illustrating the intersection and influence of gayness on these deliberations, demonstrated that in these instances the process was effectively queered.

#### *Migration from ...*

For some students, moving away from family, friends and home communities to attend university may be 'a daunting problem' (Chow and Healey 2008 p. 362). A number of my participants, however, welcomed and encouraged this disconnection by deliberately choosing institutions necessitating a geographic relocation from home spaces – although their reasons for wanting to move away from these environments varied. For example, Simon wanted to attend a university away from a locale he found unexciting, whereas Alex equated spatial with emotional disassociation.

I wanted to get away from my home town because I hate it so much. It's just so boring, there's nothing there at all ... It just gets to a point where yes it's a nice place to live but you just need a change and to just get away from it. (Simon)

I just always wanted to get away and to be alone. I went through some difficult things when I was 16 – my father died, and then I had to go to the army for a year. So it was a bit hard for me. (Alex)

Simon's extract indicates much dissatisfaction with his home town, which he experienced as '*boring*'. A contradiction is apparent in him using such a strong word as '*hate*' to describe his feelings toward this environment, yet also saying that '*it's a nice place to live*'. Hence, he acknowledges that other people may be content there, but that it does not cater to any of his particular needs or wants ('*there's nothing there at all*') – be it as a young man, or a young gay man. Simon's university choice was therefore based on the fact his tolerance and boredom thresholds were exceeded living at home. He not only to move somewhere different, but also establish some geographic distance from this space.

Alex reported an acute desire to attend a university away from his home in Cyprus, as indicated by his statement that he had '*always*' wanted to leave there. He identified two highly significant incidents which encouraged his migration – namely the death of his father, and his national service. The trauma of these were perhaps exacerbated by Alex's gayness, since he was not out to anyone in his family and also (presumably) had to hide it during his time in the army. Thus, his assertion that '*it was a bit hard for me*' is an understatement. Alex's wish '*to be alone*' can be read as a response to these events and a need for some physical and psychological space where he could collect and focus upon himself, even to the extent that he chose to study in a different country. He therefore based his university choice on seeking the calm and quiet that Simon wanted to escape from.

Some participants did make explicit links between wanting to study at a university which required a move away from home communities and issues relating to their sexuality. A number stated that their decisions to attend an institution necessitating a geographic displacement from their home environments had been heavily informed by them experiencing these domestic spaces as heterosexist and / or homophobic.

At home I had a boyfriend and I had to have specific days that I saw him. I had to plan it out. I had to keep my phone on silent in the house in case it went off. I had to go and answer phone calls sometimes in the back garden because my Dad would be there and I knew he'd be asking me cos he knew that I had a boyfriend. He wasn't too pleased about it – about everything.  
(Jack)

Geographies of sexuality have typically framed the home as a space for the (re)production of heteronormative and heterosexist discourses which restrict, inhibit and silence alternative sexualities (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Valentine et al. 2003). In some instances, the home may even become a place where people who are labelled as gay (even if they do not actually self-identify as such) are vulnerable to homophobic harassment and victimisation from family, neighbours, friends and even strangers (Valentine et al. 2003). Thus, 'gay men and lesbians often experience homes as sites of marginalisation, silence, danger and fear' (Gorman-Murray 2008 p. 285), with many reportedly remaining 'in the closet' and undertaking extensive identity work to maintain a pretence of heterosexuality there (Valentine et al. 2003). As such, studies on gay people and the home have focussed on their difficulties and negative experiences in negotiating their transgressive identities in this space.

Some home environments may therefore discourage and disallow the addressing of non-heterosexual identities. In the above extract Jack detailed the ways in which he tried to manage his same-sex relationship at home, and negotiate it in accordance to his Father's non-acceptance of not only his boyfriend, but of his (non-hetero)sexuality *per se*. Although 'many [gay youth] are powerful in their negotiations around sexuality' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 121), Jack's account indicates just how difficult and stressful management of a gay identity can be. His feelings of restrictiveness in the way he felt obliged to live out (or, rather, not live out) his sexuality at home, and the work that this entailed, is conveyed through his listing of the measures he felt he '*had*' to take to prevent his gayness bleeding into the family and domestic arena. This included Jack spatially removing his sexuality from his parental home, and in literally not allowing it voice there he maintained it as a silent discourse. His disempowerment appeared to be a result of trying to reconcile the contradictory discourses of 'boyfriend' and 'known to be gay but pretend to be heterosexual son', ironically by expending much time and energy in keeping them apart. It is therefore unsurprising that this monitoring of his sexuality and playing 'the game of hide and seek with one's family' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 134) took a toll and caused Jack to '*stress out at things*'.

Whereas Jack reported his home to be intolerant of non-heterosexualities, other participants experienced their local community as such. Ben, for example, said of his home town in South Wales that '*it's not that nice when it comes to this kind of [gay]*

*stuff*', and used the visceral image of him being '*lynched*' should his sexuality be made known there. Having to live in such an intolerant and hyper-heterosexist environment must have presented difficulties and anxieties for a young man growing up and identifying as gay, and so Ben's desire to study away from there was understandable.

Every time you go out in my home town it's just like '*Eurghh are you gay?*' ... And even in the big cities and the big towns near there, when you go out you've still got to completely watch what you say cos it's so backward sort of thing, like not very liberal at all. (Jake)

Jake also presented his home town in North Wales as both heterosexist and homophobic. He viewed such anti-gay sentiment as archaic (*'it's so backward'*), and felt uncomfortable and constantly on guard against the unintentional leakage of his (non-hetero)sexuality there (*'you've still got to completely watch what you say'*). Jake evoked the highly regulatory and intolerant climate of this community on the interview recording, when he repeated the townspeople's question '*Eurghh are you gay?*' with threat and menace. The fact that this is even asked indicated this place's strong adherence to discourses of compulsory heterosexuality, and its unwavering alertness to, guarding against, and policing of alternative ways of being<sup>33</sup>. In stating '*I thought I'm gay so I don't really want to like stay in Bangor or Aberystwyth cos it's so Welsh*', Jake told me he had not applied to universities situated in places he assumed would be governed by these same traditional values regarding gender and sexuality.

Jakes' above account is evocative of Weeks' (2007) autobiographical case study of growing up gay in the Rhondda Valleys of South Wales, and the conservative tenets of gender which pervaded these communities. Simon and Ollie also presented their Welsh home towns and villages as places governed by working-class conceptualisations of (non)acceptable gender roles and norms of masculine behaviour.

The area I come from is very sort of back in the day like miners' land kind of thing ... I just think they're still sort of stuck in that way, or there's still the influence of if you're male this is what you have to be. (Simon)

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<sup>33</sup> Such regulation of (non-hetero)sexualities at university is discussed in Chapter 6 with regard to straight male flatmates and student accommodation space.

We were from the valleys, very like mining community, 'only gay in the village' type thing. (Ollie)

These extracts convey an awareness of the dominance of a firmly defined hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, and how any deviations from this are prohibited (*'if you're male this is what you have to be'*). Ollie cited the oft-quoted catchphrase of the character Dafydd Thomas from the comedy television programme *Little Britain* of being *'the only gay in the village'* to suggest how conspicuous an openly gay person in these environments would be. Simon also said that *'If somebody was gay in my home village it would be like "Oh yeah that's the gay one" ... "Wow, first man on the moon" kind of thing'*. The label *'that's the gay one'* marginalises, reduces and stigmatises the person, but the use of the singular form also conveys a community where heterosexuality is very much the norm, and where anyone who does not fit into or align themselves to this discourse is situated as a minority figure of fascination and strangeness.

Later in his interview Simon reiterated just how strongly these gender rules were embedded within his home community, stating that *'even though it's a city I think it's quite backward, they're not very open-minded people'*. The form of masculinity Simon discusses above is particularly hard, with his description of it as *'very sort of back in the day'* indicating that it is a way of being which is governed by traditional and old-fashioned (yet nevertheless lasting and stoic) assumptions and expectations. Both Simon and Ollie draw upon the figure of the miner (as does Weeks) as shorthand to convey the typology of masculinity that these communities value, adhere and aspire to, and enforce. The mining profession has been identified as being saturated by hyper-masculinity (Somerville and Abrahamsson 2003), as portrayed in the film *Billy Elliot* and utilised most effectively to contrast with the main character's gender atypical dancing aspirations. The fact that two participants referred to this image of the miner for the same reasons indicates its potency as a signifier of unwavering and strictly regimented heterosexual masculinity.

Not only were Jake, Simon and Ollie aware of and attuned to the regulations regarding their gendered performance in their home communities, but they also assimilated into the hegemonic heteronormative discourses pervading these spaces. For example, Ollie stated *'I'd tend to butch it up a bit'* when going into the village pub, and Jake monitored his verbal discourse (*'you've still got to completely watch what you say'*). These

participants therefore not only positioned themselves as other, but worked to align themselves with the dominant heterosexist and masculine discourses operating within their home villages, towns and cities<sup>34</sup>. Hence, their choosing a university requiring a move away from these environments was informed by the wish to free themselves from these strongly felt and experienced rules governing their behaviour. This desire (and, perhaps, need) to go somewhere they could 'be themselves' is discussed below.

Although some participants wanted to deliberately establish some geographical distance from the family home to attend university, so they also wanted to remain in close enough proximity to enable 'serial returns' (Ford et al. 2002 p. 2465). Indeed, for many students, moving away to study 'includes an implicit assumption that the young person has a right to return [to the parental home] that can be exercised regularly and routinely and over a protracted period' (Rugg et al. 2004 p. 31).

I applied to here mostly because I didn't want to go too far away. My sister went to university up in Scotland and it was a nightmare taking her stuff up and whenever she wanted stuff bringing back. That felt like a bit too much hassle. So I wanted somewhere kind of fairly close by, being close enough but able to get away from the family home. (Eli)

It [the university] is only an hour away from home, so it's alright to nip back for the odd weekend if you want to see your mates and stuff. (Jack)

Here is a good 45 minutes away from where I live, so it's near. My parents do come to see me quite a bit, take me out for lunch and that. But it's kind of far away, like I'm on my own too. (Toby)

Eli spoke of wanting to avoid problematic logistics of moving his belongings from the family home to university, which increased according to how far away the institution was. Distance from home towns to enable return trips to be made relatively easily was also a determinant in other participants' university choices. Jack and Toby's above extracts convey a wish to occupy a mid-ground between a detachment from the parental home and complete independence at university. This balance of wanting to be '*close to*

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<sup>34</sup> Participants' performative reinscription and problematising of heteronormativity in university space is discussed in Chapter 8.



*home, but not too close*’ (Simon), or as Toby put it with regard to university, *‘it’s near [home] ... but it is kind of far away’*, was partly achieved through choosing an institution within a certain geographic distance from home communities. This range varied between participants, with Eli stating Scotland was too far from his home in Gloucestershire, and Jack and Toby content with being respectively a one hour and a forty-five minute drive away from their parents. Literal comfort zones in terms of distance from the family home, and how far these could extend, were therefore further considerations and influencing factors on participants’ university decisions.

A common reason students who choose to live and study at home give for doing so are to maintain existing social networks, which provide the comfort of the familiar during the often anxious transition into the world of higher education (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). Although many of my participants wanted to maintain some contact with home whilst they ‘found their feet’ at university, Jake and Simon said they did not want to attend the same institution as certain people they knew from their home environments, and deliberately based their university choices on disrupting these social networks.

None of my friends from home were coming here. I mean my friends from home are all fine and everything but I wanted to go somewhere different so I’d be forced to meet new people. Lots of my friends went to X [University], and if I’d gone to there I’d just like be ‘Oh can I come see you tonight?’ (Jake)

I didn’t want to go to Y University because there are a few people from school that I really didn’t like. I was friends with them at the time, but I just thought no I don’t wanna go there because I might run into them. (Simon)

Jake and Simon both wanted to excommunicate themselves geographically from their *‘friends’*, but their reasons for doing so appeared to be quite different. Jake’s wish to distance himself can be read as a self-imposed challenge, whereby in attending a different university to them he would have no option but to completely remap his social networks there (*‘so I’d be forced to meet new people’*). However, Simon’s wanting to go to a different institution appears to be related to his sexuality. Although he asserts that he did not apply to the same university as these friends because he no longer viewed them as such, a fearfulness can be detected in his quote. Having been raised in such

heterosexist and homophobic environments, it is likely that Simon's friends from his home community would harbour heterosexist and homophobic attitudes. He confirmed this in relating how '*at school and even in college and home it was like "Oh my God, gay" and everybody made fun of anyone that was gay*', and disclosing that he had not come out to these people. Simon's decision to attend a different institution from them may therefore have been due to him wanting to freely explore his gay identity at university, which he could not do if fearful of encountering their homophobia and intolerance. A distinction can therefore be made between Jake *choosing* to go to a different university from these people from school for reasons of personal growth and challenge, and Simon feeling that he *has* to go somewhere else and basing his decision on an avoidance and self-protective strategy.

These accounts also illustrate how, although participants may not have been financially or geographically restricted in which universities they could attend, they nevertheless imposed constraints upon their choices. Selecting and rejecting institutions based upon seeking to avoid particular people may be a consideration for all students regardless of their sexuality. However, doing so on the basis on these people's assumed or known heterosexist and homophobic attitudes and behaviour, as Simon did, is specific to gay students' university choice processes.

Some participants therefore wanted to escape from the heterosexism and strictly regulated boundaries of acceptable (i.e. heterosexual) behaviour which operated in their home communities, and from gay-intolerant people from these places. Another common reason for choosing universities requiring a move away was to be free from the relentless public surveillance in these spaces. Participants' accounts (below) were reminiscent of those of rural youth who often report high visibility and constant surveillance to be a negative (Glendinning et al. 2003), as indicated by Tucker and Matthews (2001) referring to them as being 'often *victims* of the adult gaze' (p. 163 emphasis added). The fiction of Agatha Christie, Stephen King, Ruth Rendell and John Updike capture the sometimes stifling mentality of such village and small-town communities (in both the US and UK) where everyone knows everyone else, and gossip and rumour mongering are the inhabitants' favourite pastimes.

My participants' feelings of being constantly watched and consequently always having to monitor their behaviour in these rural spaces were heightened by their sexuality. For example, when discussing his possessions in his room in university accommodation, Jake talked of the surveillance of his home town and his resultant self-regulation of his gayness.

[Here are] my *Queer as Folk* and like random gay DVDs that I bought when I came to uni because I could. Cos I could never do that at home. Cos everyone knew you at home, so if you bought a gay DVD they'd be like 'Oh you're gay'. (Jake)

Jake here related the closeness and tightly-woven social network of his home community, and inferred that should his sexuality become known there it would quickly spread around the town. His statement that he could '*never*' take part in any activity or behaviour that identified him as gay (such as buying a gay-themed DVD) indicated just how unwilling he was to be positioned and known as such in this space. Parallels between Jake not allowing his sexuality to 'bleed' in any way into his home life can be made to a gay male participant in Telford's study, who stated that he had 'to sneak away from the area [I live] to do the gay business because I'd be dead if anyone found out what I was doing' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 129). In buying not just one DVD but a selection when he came to university '*because I could*', Jake not only welcomed but took full advantage of the anonymity that attending university away from his home provided.

Being in a small town where everyone knows everyone else - my Grandmother has this network of old lady spies who she employs ... It spreads, people talk. It's very close-knit, there's a lot of alliances and stuff, but at the same time it's very enclosed and very constricting ... I've got a friend who's constantly thinking oh people are judging me, people are taking notice of me, and you come here [to university] and like everyone's far too concerned in their own things and no one knows that many other people. In a small town everything is interconnected but in a city no one knows anyone else so you can be fairly anonymous. (Ben)

Ben also spoke of escaping from the relentless and judgmental gaze of his village, conveying and heightening its restrictive nature by his use of the word '*very*' before '*enclosed*', '*close-knit*' and '*constricting*'. Although related in a humorous way, Ben's

description of his home community and his trying to evade the scrutiny of his Grandmother and her '*network of old lady spies*' did evoke a sense of somewhere he was always having to engage in self-vigilance and monitoring to guard against any suspicion or disclosure of his sexuality. His juxtaposition of home and city indicated how seductive and appealing he found the anonymity afforded by less interwoven social networks in urban areas. Ben's university choice was therefore strongly informed by a desire to move away from somewhere he was continuously on stage and having to ensure against any leakage of his gayness, to a place he could be less wary about having to socially regulate his behavior in accordance to dominant discourses of sexuality and gender.

However, in addition to wanting to move away from particular spaces, also present in some participants' accounts of their university choice were desires to move towards others, as discussed in the next section of this chapter.

#### *Migration towards ...*

I thought it would be somewhere I could be more gay. (Jake)

You can be more open at university, I did think that. I thought this is my chance to be who I am and not feel guilty about it.  
(Daniel)

For Telford's participants, 'being queer and finding a place where there was the potential to come out safely and live as "out" was critical to their choice of where to go' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 127). My participants' decisions to attend universities where they could study away from home communities were also linked to expectations of being able to freely express their gayness within higher education. These assumptions were informed by their predictions that students would be '*more open and [have a] tolerant attitude towards gay people*' (Ben), which they conflated with level of education ('*because university was very educated, people here are educated and things like that*' [Vivian]), age ('*many of the people are older you know*' [Vivian]), and interaction with and increased visibility of openly gay people ('*It's not like a couple of decades ago where you could maybe go and be like the only out person at university*' [Toby]).

Both Jake and Daniel (above) expected university to be somewhere they could be less concerned about aligning their behaviour to strictly patrolled norms of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality than at home. Daniel's conspicuous use of the word '*guilty*' indicated just how strongly he had internalised the heterosexism and homophobia of his home town, which had made him feel that his gayness was wrong, unacceptable, and something to be ashamed of. Jake and Daniel therefore viewed university as a place they could have more freedom in openly expressing their sexuality than they had previously been allowed. A contradiction is noticeable here between these participants being drawn to the (perceived) opportunities university offered for them to address and live out their gayness (as noted and discussed throughout this section), and the downplaying of their sexuality as identified and deconstructed in the previous chapter.

Migration towards environments perceived to be liberal, open-minded and offer freedom of expression is a common and oft-related narrative in the lives of gay people, not only students (Binnie 2004; Brown 2000; Weeks 2007). Furthermore, these moves have tended to be towards cities, which have been noted to have 'a key role to play in lesbian and gay folklore' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 83)<sup>35</sup>.

The migration, the journey, was frequently to a large urban space where communities, networks, private and public spaces could be marked out, where desires met and identities were reinvented ... The migration was moving people from the margins to the heart of the city. (Weeks 2007 p. 146)

As the vast majority of universities in the UK are located within or near urban areas, going away to study will almost inevitably involve a move to the city, be it from a rural environment or from one urban space to another. Many of my participants' accounts highlighted the importance these spaces had on their university choices, with Noah even stating that '*I was more interested in the aspects of the city when I chose this institution, not the university*'. One characteristic of the city participants reported to be a factor in their university choice was size, they preferring medium-sized spaces as opposed to

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<sup>35</sup> Although differences between gay men and lesbians' migration patterns have been noted (Adler and Brenner 1992; Rothenberg 1995).

large urban areas. For example, they stated *'I enjoy going to London but I don't think I could ever live somewhere that big, it's way too hectic'* (Toby), *'I like going out in London but I don't think I could live there, it is just too big'* (Vivian), and *'It's a nice city, it's not too big. I went to open days in London and Manchester and it was like "Oh, the tube"' [pulls a face]* (Jake). The significance that London has for gay people is indicated by Toby, Vivian and Jake all naming the city when talking of their university choices, even though they rejected attending an institution there because of its size and perceived metropolitan bustle. Some of Telford's participants also spoke of the allure and seductiveness of this particular city, and specifically chose universities there so they could lose themselves amongst the gay bars and nightclubs of Soho. These were the kind of spaces which Toby and Vivian may have frequented when they visited London. As such, these participants were aware of and enjoyed the opportunities and facilities this city offered them as gay people, even if their unease and perhaps fearfulness of the capital's size meant they did not actually apply to study there.

Escape narratives towards spaces presumed to be accommodating and accepting of non-heterosexualities were particularly evident in the university choice accounts of those participants whose communities of origin were located in rural areas. Much research has traced gay people's movements from rural to large urban spaces (e.g. Binnie 1997; Brown 2000; Elder et al. 2004; Knopp 2000), with 'story after story and study after study' (Knopp 2004 p. 123) detailing these migrations towards towns and cities with visible, large, active gay communities. Toby and Todd both saw attending university as a chance to explore their sexuality socially within these city spaces and at the institution, which they framed in relation to the limited opportunities afforded in their home towns. They were thus drawn to the opportunities to construct their 'families of choice' (Weeks et al. 2001), and demonstrated that through such deliberate spatial displacement gay people may engage in 'remapping their worlds and their places in it' (Knopp 2004 p. 123).

[University] is really a kind of chance to just get out there and really like socialise with other gay people and get on with them, cos I hadn't really had the opportunity to do that back home. (Toby)

I definitely saw [university] as a place where I would be allowed to explore my identity a little bit further by going to gay clubs and meeting gay people. Cos where I live is a very small town. There probably aren't many out gay people there. (Todd)

Both Toby and Todd predicted that university would be a place they could meet other gay people. In flagging up the seductiveness and hope of socialising with other gays at university, they alluded to the hetero-saturated nature of their home towns which did not allow them the opportunities to engage with their sexuality in these ways. Such heteronormativity appeared to be particularly effective in encouraging (or, rather, forcing) non-heterosexualities to maintain invisibility and a non-public presence in Todd's home community, where *'there aren't many out gay people'*. Embedding themselves within non-heterosexual social and community networks therefore appeared to be an appealing part of 'doing gay' for these participants, which contradicted again their earlier downplaying and dismissal of the importance of their sexuality in their lives as gay students (see Chapter 4).

The gay scene was a highly significant factor in both Vivian and Matthew's university choices. These spaces have been reported to offer emotional and psychological safety and security (Myslik 1996). In addition, they 'play a crucial role in facilitating the formation of sexual involvements, friendships, partnerships and social networks, and can offer the promise of a new and "freer" life' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 84), and 'can provide queer students with greater access to friendship, a sense of community and sexual relationships' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 132).

[X University] didn't have a very big gay scene. So it was between Y University and here. I looked at the gay scene in Y, saw it wasn't massive. The biggest one to it I think was Z, which is a good gay scene. But then I'd heard a few things about the gay scene here, that it was actually quite good. And I'd read that there were some clubs and there was a few bars and thought oh that sounds good ... So that did bear on which university I chose. (Vivian)

I knew that it had sort of a couple of gay clubs and a few gay bars. That did play a part in my choice ... W [University] has obviously got a much better reputation and is a much better university, but W [the town] doesn't really have much of a gay scene at all. (Matthew)

Like some of Telford's participants, Vivian and Matthew had selected institutions on the basis of the size of the nearby gay scene, defining a '*good scene*' by the number of gay-specific places and facilities that it offered, and eliminating those with local scenes that were small or had a reputation as unexciting. Both these participants had researched the gay scenes in the cities of the universities they were interested in applying to, Vivian having read up and hearing about it from his friends' experiences, whereas it is unclear whether Matthew gained his information from having direct experience on the scene there or via secondary sources. The undertaking of such 'work' and 'research' indicates just how important these spaces were in these participants' higher education choices.

In fact, such was the significance they gave the gay scene in their decisions that for Vivian it was *the* determining factor in choosing which university to ultimately attend, and Matthew turned down the opportunity to enrol at a university that was '*much better*', both in academic reputation and other unspecified terms, because he viewed the local gay scene as lacking. Matthew's account of the scene taking precedence over academic concerns in his selection mirrors that of one of Telford's participants, who 'said that his main reason for choosing a London college was "to spend more time at Traffic [a gay dance club in London] and to turn up at college occasionally' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 132).

The influence of some participants' sexuality on their university choices was therefore apparent in their accounts of moves away from home environments. These migrations were intersected and informed by their gayness, as participants wanted to escape from spaces governed and regulated by stringent masculinity, heterosexism and homophobia, and also from people who had internalised these attitudes and opinions. Furthermore, some also wanted to distance themselves from the constant surveillance and resultant restrictiveness they experienced in these spaces. As discussed in this section, also present in some participants' narratives was an alternate direction and flow of migration towards places they assumed would allow them opportunities to freely engage with their sexuality in spaces more tolerant, supportive, accepting, less judgemental and better equipped to cater for the needs of gay people than their home communities. Participants' accounts of their university choices were therefore characterised by geographies, journeys, and migrations from and towards particular spaces.



## Conclusion

In detailing and deconstructing a number of the factors that participants reported to be influential in their university choices, this chapter had addressed the ways in which (non-hetero)sexuality intersects with and mediates the important decision of where to study for a higher education degree. For my participants, as Epstein et al.'s (2003) opening quote to this chapter suggests, these deliberations were indeed based upon more than academic concerns.

I have argued that university choices should be approached with the understanding that they are embedded within class distinctions. My participants' middle-class status meant they had the opportunities to, were expected to, and did decide to attend elite institutions that required geographic relocation from their home communities. Some of the influences on participants' university choices (such as class positioning, subject availability, and size of the city) were unrelated to their gayness, and hence may be factors and concerns for all students regardless of their sexuality. However, a decidedly gay edge could also be identified in their accounts. For example, they wanted to move away from their home communities because they experienced them as heterosexist and homophobic, and thus stifling and claustrophobic; they did not want to attend the same university as certain people from these environments because of their gay-intolerant attitudes; they wanted to escape from village and small-town surveillance because it restricted the expression and living out of their gayness due to them continuously being 'on stage'; and they wanted to attend a university where there were social networking opportunities and a high concentration of visibly gay people.

In demonstrating that the university choice process for these gay students was highly reflexive, conscientious, strategic, considered (and, by being influenced by their gayness, queered), this chapter presents and positions my participants as neoliberal subjects. They were active shapers of their lives, making deliberate decisions and choices that they thought would enable them to live out their gayness at university as they wanted to, and strategically basing their decisions on maximising their opportunities as gay students to freely engage with their sexuality. Thus, these participants positioned themselves away from the disempowering and passive martyr-target-victim discourse.

Telford may note that such deliberations, geographies and journeys may be in vain.

Queer students may well discover that they have left the confining spaces of their secondary schools only to realise that similar agendas of compulsory heterosexuality continue to constrict their lives in higher education. (Epstein et al. 2003 pp. 138-139)

However, as illustrated in the following chapters of this thesis, participants' data indicates that their expectations of studying somewhere more gay-tolerant and supportive than their home communities, of students being more liberal and gay-friendly than people from these environments, and of being able to express, work on and live out their gay identities more freely at university than in these home spaces, were met to a large extent. Therefore, the care participants took, the considerations they addressed, and the decisions they made in choosing where to study as detailed in this chapter ultimately proved beneficial and worthwhile. The way in which their sexuality influenced, intersected with and mediated their higher education experiences is further demonstrated in the following chapter, which explores the ways in which participants negotiated relationships with their flatmates.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**ASSERTION, REGULATION AND CONSENT:**  
**GAY STUDENTS, STRAIGHT FLATMATES, AND THE**  
**(HETERO)SEXUALISATION OF UNIVERSITY ACCOMMODATION**  
**SPACE<sup>36</sup>**

We laugh about it now and he'll say to me 'Oh you won't  
believe what I said when I heard there was a gay moving in'.  
(Simon)

In the previous chapter I examined the influences that informed participants' university choices, and the ways in which their gayness impacted upon these decisions. Inherent in these accounts were participants' expectations and assumptions of higher education being 'gay friendly', and somewhere they would be able (and allowed) to address and express their sexuality more freely and with less wariness than in home communities. The focus of the thesis now shifts on to participants' experiences having actually arrived at university, thus allowing insight into whether these expectations and assumptions were actually met.

Participants' lives as gay students were significantly influenced by the people they shared their university accommodation with. This was indicated by the attention they gave to flatmates in their interviews – more than to coursemates, friends, boyfriends and family members. It was standard practice at the institution they attended for the accommodation office to house all first year students within university halls, and to determine flatmates. As participants were not able to pick who they lived with, these first year groupings had a particular dynamic which distinguished and differentiated them from later years (where students could freely choose their accommodation and who to share it with). Hence, this chapter focuses on participants' relationships with their first year flatmates in halls of residence.

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<sup>36</sup> Parts of this chapter have been adapted into a paper to be published in *Gender and Education* (forthcoming).

Halls of residence were divided into flats, which differed in size. Participants lived with four to eleven other students, with most having six or eight flatmates. There was usually a roughly equal gender split in these groups, although Simon, Todd, Eli and Andrew shared their accommodation only with male students. Flatmates were of similar ages, but enrolled on different degree subjects. My British participants tended to be housed with other UK students, although Will's late application to the university's residences office resulted in him being placed in accommodation specifically for students from overseas. Andrew and Alex's status as international students meant they were also accommodated exclusively with other non-UK flatmates<sup>37</sup>. All participants reported being the only gay person in these groupings, knowing or assuming that the people with whom they shared their accommodation were all straight.

Building upon conceptualisations of the sexualisation of space as noted in Chapter 1, this chapter addresses participant / flatmates relationships through interrogating the ways in which sexual discourses are produced, enforced, regulated, legitimised and challenged within student accommodation. Following a review of the literature on gay students and university accommodation (Section 1), I analyse participants' assertions that they had 'educated' their flatmates regarding non-heterosexualities (Section 2). I then detail the micro-level processes, as framed by dictums of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities, by which participants' male flatmates reinscribed the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) in their living spaces (Section 3), and deconstruct how they safeguarded it through their verbal and physical regulation of alternative sexualities (Section 4). I then interrogate how participants negotiated such heteronormativity (Section 5). In this chapter I therefore position student accommodation as a key site for the socio-spatial production of the heterosexual matrix and reinscription of heteronormativity, as construed through the workings of assertion, regulation and consent.

### **Section 1. Gay students and university accommodation**

The people with whom students live can impact significantly upon their higher education experiences, particularly in the crowded and confined spaces of halls of residence (Vasquez and Rohrer 2006). However, despite the vast number of students living in

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<sup>37</sup> This was despite literature from the university stating 'It is the policy of the Residences Office to allocate students to mixed flats in terms of gender and nationality/race'.

university accommodation (be it halls of residence or shared student housing), the standard practice of many institutions of allocating places in such spaces to most (if not all) of their first year undergraduate students, and the amount of time that students spend in these environments, the academic focus of research undertaken on these living quarters has tended to be narrow in scope, dated and US-based.

The living arrangements of university accommodation, where many people from a variety of social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds are housed together, has been framed as positive when locating students' relationships with their flatmates within a social psychological framework informed by contact theory (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Here, interaction with outgroups can reportedly reduce intolerance, prejudice and hostility towards them, for 'it is far easier and more common to hold negative attitudes toward members of a stigmatised group if you do not know or feel connected to someone, if you cannot see their humanity and similarity to yourself' (Chan 1996 p. 23). Increased exposure to difference therefore supposedly corresponds to greater understanding and empathy (Pike 2002; Vasquez and Rohrer 2006).

However, just as the social dynamics dictated and shaped by university accommodation may encourage students' acceptance of peer diversity, so they may conversely exacerbate tensions within and between individuals and groups living there. For example, Palmer (1996; 1998) argued in her (now dated) US studies that the combination of excessive noise, alcohol and large numbers of students housed in close proximity to one another in halls of residence can create and contribute to a highly pressurised – and unsafe – environment. Her cataloguing of incidents of students in these settings using guns, knives, razor blades and baseball bats against one another in instances of sexual abuse, drunken assaults and fights between ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends support her claims, as do other researchers' earlier reports of arson, suicide and even murder within these spaces (Siegel 1994; Waldo et al. 1993).

Such violence is also reflected in the small body of work on gay students and their living spaces. These students' accounts of their experiences in university accommodation parallel those of their campus lives (as discussed in Chapter 2), with both environments reportedly being intolerant, unwelcoming, hostile and homophobic to non-heterosexualities. In one study, notices in halls relating to gay issues were defaced, torn

down and spat at; derogatory comments were written on the doors of two student wardens who were known to be gay; and ‘Fag in [room] 408. We don’t like cocksuckers in our hall’ was scrawled on a mirror in a communal bathroom (Rhoads 1997a p. 282). Other reports include a gay male student living in halls stating ‘I had some nasty stuff put on my door, and once a guy walking past my room said “I can’t stand *fags*!”’ (Moffatt 1989 p. 269 emphasis in original). Also, a gay student visiting a friend in halls was beaten, had his hands tied behind his back, and the word ‘faggot’ written on his head after it had been shaved by the perpetrators (Graziano 2005). In another study, gay students were planning to move into alternative accommodation, and even considering abandoning their studies and leaving university altogether, because of the homophobia directed toward them there (Bendet 1986). This literature therefore strongly indicates that ‘physical, verbal, and emotional abuse of gay and lesbian students in residential settings is common’ (Bourassa and Shipton 1991 p. 83), and details how and why they may perceive and experience ‘residence halls ... as places where there is significant harassment if not outright danger’ (ibid. p. 81).

It is a concern that many (if not the majority) of people targeted for such homophobic harassment in their university accommodation because of their known or assumed gayness are reluctant to report the incident(s) to the institution’s authorities (Bendet 1986; D’Augelli 1989a). Reasons for maintaining a silence include fear of retribution, wariness of having to disclose non-heterosexuality to university staff whose sympathies towards gay students are not known, and concern that doing so will make their gay identity public (Berrill and Herek 1992; Comstock 1989). The actual extent of homophobia in halls of residence is therefore difficult to ascertain.

There are only a handful of comparative studies on gay students and their experiences within university accommodation at UK institutions. These are more recent accounts than those reported above, but nevertheless reiterate these earlier findings. For example, Telford in Epstein et al. (2003) relates how a gay student living in halls of residence was verbally harassed by his flatmates to the extent that he had to move into alternative accommodation. Similarly, the lesbian, gay and bisexual participants in my studies (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999) reported hearing anti-gay remarks and derogatory jokes in their halls, and seeing posters there relating to gay issues torn down and defaced. Flatmates had even sprayed ‘Hello gay boy’ and ‘Gay

boy lives here' in shaving foam on one participant's door and window. Furthermore, in accordance to US studies, these incidents were not reported to university authorities because of the assumption that little or no effective action would or could be taken by them. We therefore concluded that gay students living in halls of residence in the UK faced comparable negative experiences to their American peers.

In reporting the university accommodation of both US and UK institutions to be unsupportive and intolerant of non-heterosexualities, this literature firmly situates the gay student experience in these spaces within the ubiquitous martyr–target–victim framework as detailed in Chapter 2.

### **Section 2. 'Educating' flatmates**

Many gay youth strategically maintain a silence around their sexuality in the family home and school to avoid stigmatization, harassment and victimization, and only begin to address and live out their gayness openly when at university (Epstein et al. 2003; Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999). As such, it is not surprising that some participants reported that many of their flatmates said they had not encountered a gay person prior to meeting them. Matthew, however, noted that the dynamics of the closet meant that such assertions required refinement, stating *'I probably wasn't the first guy he'd met who was gay, he just didn't know it'*.

Simon framed flatmates' lack of contact with an openly gay person before coming to university as problematic.

No doubt they had their ideas [about gay people]. I mean if you look at gay people you generally see like Graham Norton<sup>38</sup>. People might think all gay people are like him if you've never met a gay person before. (Simon)

Just as 'contact with LGB people replaces inaccurate myths with more accurate, positive truths' (Burn et al. 2005 p. 27), Simon's concern was that not having interacted with people who were known to be gay before meant his flatmates only had often unflattering

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<sup>38</sup> A stereotypically and openly gay television presenter, comedian and actor in UK broadcasting.

stereotypes to draw upon to inform their judgments, opinions and attitudes about the population. As Ken Plummer stated some time ago:

With little direct face-to-face experience of homosexuality, the 'conventional' society is almost entirely dependent for its knowledge of homosexuals upon the media, stereotypes and lay and scientific imagery. It cannot think about homosexuality in real (i.e. non-stereotyped) terms, because it thinks it has no contact with the *real* phenomenon. (1975 p. 194 emphasis in original)

These flatmates therefore lacked the tools derived from socialisation with known-to-be gay people to assess, challenge and reject negative and misleading caricatures. Therefore, corresponding to contact theory's previously mentioned premise that interaction with outgroups may nurture tolerance and acceptance of their diversity and difference, so participants framed housing flatmates with an openly gay student as a positive.

Having never met a person they knew to be gay before, flatmates positioned participants as figures of intrigue, curiosity and fascination. Some initiated discussions with participants on gay-oriented subjects, with Jack relating that *'I've had conversations at our kitchen table at half past two in the morning, quite deep ones, with some of my flatmates'*, and Jake noting that his flatmates had discussed with him issues such as gay marriage, gay adoption and gay people not being allowed to give blood. The tenor of these conversations was reported to be inquisitive rather than antagonistic or confrontational, with Jack stating *'I think they're just quite interested to know about it'*.

Flatmates' preoccupation with participants' sexuality was further conveyed through the constant, many and wide-ranging questions they asked them about being gay. Vivian attributed this interest and requests for information to his flatmates never having had the opportunity to converse with an openly gay person before.

She'd never really been around gay people that much so she was asking question after question after question ... Some people from small places they've never met a gay person before so they do ask a lot of questions. (Vivian)



James stated that his flatmates were *'very inquisitive'* and asked him questions about *'everything'* relating to his sexuality. Toby more specifically reported that his flatmates asked him about the aetiology of his gayness (*'She was like "Well why are you gay?"'*), Jake his school experiences (*'They'll ask things like "Oh what was it like in school?"'*), Vivian about sexual acts (*'Their favourite question is "How do you decide who does who?"'*), and Todd his boyfriend and same-sex relationship cultures (*'I was dating someone at the time and my flatmate started asking lots of questions about him'*).

It is notable that participants related that such questions were typically asked by female flatmates (*'she'*) or flatmates as a collective (*'they'*), but never males only (i.e. *'he'*). Boys come to understand the *'socially shared meanings of masculinity'* (Bird 1996 p. 122), and learn that in performing in ways that conform to and confirm hegemonic heterosexual masculinities they gain respect, status and privilege from their male peers (Kehily 2000, 2001). One characteristic of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is the participation in highly vocal sex talk of heterosexual desires, conquests and virility (Dalley-Trim 2007; Kehily 2001). Conversely, this discourse also demands a marked distancing from *'serious'* engagement with homosexuality, as seen by school boys being quick and keen to stress that they had been made to watch a video which featured same-sex couples by their teacher, and not through their own choice (Nayak and Kehily 1997). Not asking questions regarding gayness can therefore be read as male flatmates not wanting to demonstrate a public curiosity or interest in alternative sexualities, for fear that this would diminish their masculine capital and status, and also cast suspicion on their own sexual identity (Kitzinger 2001). As Nayak and Kehily (1997) note, *'talking about homosexuality within certain masculine peer groups in anything but an abusive or jocular way is virtually impossible'* (p. 151). Thus, it appears that assimilation into, acceptance from, and standing and position within peer group hierarchies is just as important for participants' male flatmates at university as in school – an argument I reiterate throughout this chapter when discussing these student's gendered performances and practices.

Participants said they were willing to be positioned in educational roles by their flatmates, asserting that *'as a rule I don't mind answering people's questions or them asking me questions'* (Jack) and *'it really doesn't bother me at all'* (James). However, Noah and Toby expressed reluctance for talk to focus exclusively on gay issues.

Everything in moderation you know. If we were talking about gay topics all the time I'd be like 'OK, I'm really actually bored of talking about gay things'. (Noah)

It's just like 'Yeah I'm gay, let's talk about something else'.  
(Toby)

These extracts mirror the Stonewall slogan 'Some people are gay. Get over it', although here participants were unwilling for their sexuality to be the sole topic of discussion in their student accommodation, rather than making a plea for acceptance or the framing of non-heterosexuality as a non-issue. Noah and Toby's accounts also indicate a diminishing patience in talking about an issue they viewed as having less importance than their flatmates did. Participants' reluctance to speak only of matters relating to their gayness, and their explicit requests to shift conversation to other topics, can be read as further indications of their reticence to be identified and perceived only on the basis of their sexuality (as has been discussed in Chapter 4). A tension was therefore sometimes apparent between flatmates wanting to speak of and address participants' sexuality, and participants distancing themselves from dialogue on the subject.

Although Noah therefore expressed some impatience and irritation at flatmates' requests for information about his sexuality, he and other participants related instances when they had positioned themselves as 'teacher' and actively proffered knowledge and information about gayness when it had not been asked for. There was much variance in the ways in which they assumed this educational role, and in the pedagogic strategies they employed.

I guess I am educating them but I don't think right, education time, I've got to set up a syllabus or something ... It's just a discussion really of two or more people learning more about stuff. It's kind of an education, but subconsciously. (Noah)

*RTJ: Do you think you've 'educated' your flatmates?*  
Yeah I think so, like indirectly. I don't sit them down, 'Right, here's a chart'. (Daniel)

Noah and Daniel were keen to stress that they imparted information about their sexuality to their flatmates through casual, unplanned and non-pressurised means rather than via any formal academic channels and strategies. Jake, however, had purposefully sought to

make his flatmates aware of and engage with discourses surrounding homosexuality.

I made everyone watch it [*Brokeback Mountain*<sup>39</sup>] ... I was only talking the other day to one of my housemates who hadn't seen it. I was like 'Right, you've got to see it, we'll have a viewing'. So yeah I do kind of force people to watch it ... And if there's something gay on the TV then I make everyone watch it. (Jake)

Jake represented himself as having made it compulsory for his flatmates to watch gay-themed films and television programmes. He was being playful in stating he organised 'a viewing' of *Brokeback Mountain*, as he rubbed his hands and grinned when speaking this phrase in his interview. Nevertheless, in contrast to Noah and Daniel's casual, nonchalant and spontaneous means of bringing the topic of their sexuality into discussions with their flatmates, Jake's extract does convey a gravitas to his 'events' which took place with the specific intent of purposefully educating his flatmates on non-heterosexualities. Jake thereby assumed an activist role, not only taking every opportunity to confront his flatmates with media addressing gay issues, but also disallowing them any say or opt-out clauses in these decisions ('*Right, you've got to see it*').

Thus, the differences between Noah and Daniel's 'softly softly' means of raising and discussing the subject of their sexuality with their flatmates, and Jake's more aggressive practices, respectively correspond to Epstein et al.'s (2000) conceptualisations of the 'good' and 'bad' homosexual. These labels relate to the extent to which gay bodies (be they individuals or national organisations) are perceived to disrupt and challenge societal and cultural heterosexist norms, and where they fall on sexual divides of masculinity / femininity, private / public, secrecy / disclosure, passive / active and uncomplaining / militant. The 'good' gay lives 'a quiet life, on the margins, with as much conformity to, and with as little disturbance of, the central categories as is possible', whereas the 'bad' homosexual 'is politically active and culturally assertive' (p. 19).

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<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, Jake may have chosen to utilise this particular film as his educational tool because of its supposedly positive portrayal of its gay protagonists. However, in focussing on the difficulties these characters faced in maintaining the secrecy of their same-sex relationship, and the climactic (inferred but strongly implied) homophobically-motivated murder of one of them, it can also be argued that *Brokeback Mountain* in fact reiterates rather than rejects or subverts the 'gay person as martyr-target-victim' discourse.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. Noah and Daniel's low-key style perhaps fostered an informal and relaxed atmosphere, which facilitated listening and receptiveness. Conversely, Jake's more direct and domineering strategy of asserting that his flatmates have '*got to*' see *Brokeback Mountain* and of '*mak[ing]* everyone' watch television programmes on gay issues, may have made his flatmates feel they were being bludgeoned and bulldozed into facing gayness against their will, resulting in a backlash, resentment, and them being less amenable and responsive. Furthermore, Noah and Daniel's casual approach could be framed as well-suited to talk between flatmates and friends, whereas Jake's 'events' perhaps jarred with the context within which such 'education' took place and the relationship status between 'teacher' and 'pupil', with formal schooling arguably not being a function of friendship. This relational incongruity and conflict may have further diminished Jake's flatmates' willingness to participate in his 'lessons' and, if they did so, their receptiveness to his 'teaching'.

Therefore, gayness was not a taboo or prohibited topic of discussion in participants' student accommodation. Unlike some of their home environments described in Chapter 5 which were stringently homophobic (e.g. rural Welsh communities), or which treated gayness as an open secret (e.g. Jack having to take phone calls from his boyfriend out of his father's hearing), non-heterosexualities were allowed voice and expression in these accommodation spaces. In this way, participants' expectations that gayness could be more freely and openly addressed at university than at home were met – although in the instances reported above it is notable that it was flatmates who most often took advantage of this seeming culture of diversity within higher education to discuss alternative sexualities, rather than participants themselves.

### **Section 3. (Hetero)sexualising student accommodation space**

As detailed in Chapter 1, in this study I am using the sexualisation of space, compulsory heterosexuality and the heterosexual matrix as tools to frame theoretical understandings of my participants' experiences at university as gay students. In stating that space is sexualised, I refer to the ways that sexual discourses are constructed, marketed and promoted within environments, the organisational practices which reinscribe and reflect these ways of being, and the regulatory processes which repress and marginalise others. In this section I draw upon the geographic and spatial literature of the (hetero)sexualisation of space as practice (Johnston 2006) and 'a performative act

naturalised through repetition and regulation’ (Valentine 1996 p. 146) to inform my analysis of the ways in which discourses of straightness are constructed, re-enforced, and (despite gayness being given voice and expression as reported in the previous section of this chapter) maintained as dominant within student accommodation.

Male flatmates’ performative reinscription of prized forms of heterosexual masculinities was key in the construction of these spaces as dominantly straight. For example, Todd said of his male flatmates *‘they were sort of macho, sort of laddy boys’* and related that *‘they played football and they drank cans of beer ... They were loud’*. Vivian described how his flatmates would *‘play corridor football, as they call it, and knock lights down’*, labelling one of them as *‘very much a man’s man, an alpha male’*. Matthew similarly noted that his male flatmates engaged in displays of sporting prowess, excessive alcohol consumption, vandalism and raucousness, stating *‘It’s all very raaargh and let’s get really drunk and let’s destroy public property ... They wrestle each other’*. Just as displays of heterosexual affection and intimacy hetero-sexualise the settings they are enacted within (Rushbrook 2002), so these flatmates’ exaggerated performances of heterosexual masculinities configured student accommodation space (even including the corridors) as a site for the production of discourses around straightness through their reinscription of the heterosexual matrix.

Following Butler’s (1990) performative conceptualisation of gender as being constructed through such behavioural repetition, studies have interrogated the ways that sexuality is negotiated through these ways of ‘doing’ male / female. Here, assumptions of heterosexuality are linked to the social display of behaviour intended to be read as hegemonically masculine (Connell 1995; Kehily 2001) - what Epstein and Johnson (1994) term the heterosexual presumption. Thus, ‘being a “proper boy” involves establishing or at least investing in and projecting a recognisable (and hegemonic) heterosexual identity’ (Renold 2003 pp. 189-190). Todd, Vivian and Matthew’s male flatmates’ demonstrations of ‘heterosexual laddishness’ (Epstein and Johnson 1998 p. 166) can be read as ways in which these students ‘did’ heterosexual masculinity – or ‘came out’ as straight (Renold 2003). They are also another indication that cultures of heterosexual masculinity (Anderson 2002, 2005a; Kehily 2000) continue to be highly significant frameworks in situating straight male behaviour at university.

Male flatmates' adherence to these discourses was not only evident through their physical behaviour, but also verbally through their anti-gay remarks.

They've made odd comments about gays. If we are watching a TV show and there's someone really really camp in it they'll take the piss ... Throwing comments like 'Oh bloody gays' or something like that. Or if a gay person is on TV he's like 'Oh that's horrible' ... Or they've mentioned something to do with gay sex and he's like 'Oh that's horrible'. (Jake)

Such talk plays 'a pivotal role' (Martino 1999 p. 240) within cultures of heterosexual masculinities (Kimmel 2001, 2003; Pascoe 2007; Renold 2000), with 'contempt for homosexuality and homosexual men ... [being] part of the ideological package of hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987 p. 186). In its guise as 'fag discourse' (Pascoe 2007 p. 60), using gay terms and signifiers to verbally deride and label is not only a regulatory device to realign deviants to the tenets of straightness (as discussed in the next section of this chapter), but is also a discursive strategy to (re)affirm and assert the speaker's own heterosexuality (Nayak and Kehily 1997). This is a process of contrastive identification (Valentine 1998a), since 'differentiating yourself from others, pointing out what you are not is, at the same time, to define what you are' (Eliasson et al. 2007 p. 588). Hence, Jake's flatmates' '*Oh bloody gays*' comment (above) is a means of othering and distancing them from non-heterosexualities, which consequently confirms their own straightness. The currency of such talk as acceptance, approval and esteem within the fragile and dynamic gender hierarchies operating amongst and within male peer groups is well reported in schools (Anderson 2005b; Connell 2000; Eliasson et al. 2007; Swain 2006). However, as with their non-participation in 'serious' talk on gayness and their exaggerated gendered performances, it was also a key relationship practice of these heterosexual male university students.

Jake related his flatmates' talk and action following the heterosexual matrix within his student accommodation having been disrupted and destabilised through alternative ways of being given voice and expression in this space. In the above extract he detailed how his flatmates' unease was verbally expressed through derogatory remarks and statements of disgust. Todd, however, interpreted his flatmate's non-verbal cues of physically distancing himself from non-heterosexual discourses as indicators of wariness of gayness:

He hasn't said anything but it's the way he acts. Just if something gay comes up into the conversation, he sort of takes a step back and doesn't really seem to be comfortable with it.  
(Todd)

Jake and Todd's accounts illustrate how people who cannot or choose not to adhere to the norms, assumptions and expectations of heterosexuality may be 'perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent' (Rich 1987 p. 26). Jake's flatmates' utterances can be read as verbal acknowledgments of the presence of alternative sexualities in student accommodation and, through derision, as discursive means of rejecting them and thus reclaiming this space as dominantly straight. I discuss such regulation and policing of sexualities within university living spaces in Section 4 of this chapter.

The above reactions were provoked when the straightness of this space was overtly transgressed by gayness, be it by arising in conversation or shown on television. Some participants also reported incidents when their own actions had brought to light their flatmates' less-than-positive attitudes towards non-heterosexualities. These negative responses occurred when participants' gayness (unintentionally) moved from the private into the public space of their student accommodation.

A few months ago a [male] friend of mine came to stay in my room and he [my flatmate] must have heard a man's voice in my room and presumed something. And the next day he was very weird with me. The same thing happened again a couple of weeks ago, and the next day again he was weird. So I presume that he's presuming something's going on, and he just doesn't seem that comfortable with it really.

*RTJ: When you say weird, in what way?*

He just wasn't very talkative the next day. Normally he'll stop and talk to me, but he was just 'Hello, I'm going' sort of thing. He wasn't very chatty. (Todd)

Here Todd speaks of his flatmate's discomfort with gayness being expressed and brought to the fore in the accommodation, as a result of a male voice being overheard in Todd's room. This flatmate did not explicitly state that his physical distancing from and decrease in verbal communication with Todd were related to this reminder of gayness. Todd, however, interpreted it as such from the situational cues that these changes in this flatmate's behaviour occurred immediately following incidents which were construed as breaking the silence surrounding Todd's sexuality. A similar reaction from this person

following a repeat of the episode confirmed Todd's assumption that his responses were homophobic in nature. In describing his flatmate as acting '*very weird*', Todd notes the marked differences in how this flatmate related and reacted to him before and after his sexuality was foregrounded in this space. Thus, this person may not have expressed discomfort at Todd's sexuality whilst it was invisible and a non-issue, but his unease became apparent when he 'faced a terrifying, embodied object, not just some spectre of a fag' (Pascoe 2007 p. 69).

This reaction alludes to 'phantom acceptance' of Todd's sexuality, for 'while individuals profess acceptance of gays and lesbians, many are uncomfortable when actively confronted with a gay or lesbian' (Kaufman and Johnson 2004 p. 826). Thus, flatmates may profess that participants' sexuality is a non-issue (as detailed in the next chapter on coming out), but the actual extent of this supposed acceptance is seemingly dependent on how hidden and 'kept under wraps' participants' gayness actually is.

Matthew also related an incident when his flatmates had reacted negatively following his gayness 'leaking' outside the acceptable boundaries of his bedroom and into the public areas of his student flat:

Many nights M [male flatmate] has girls in his room. And one morning R [another male housemate] was saying how he could hear M, and apparently he was like 'Oh yeah, go on mate' and texting and stuff. Then a week or maybe two later, same situation but with me as opposed to M. And apparently R said something the next day about not being happy. He didn't say anything to me ... It sort of shows I think his slightly less lack of comfort with it cos he's able to congratulate and egg on his friend, but then if it's me he complains to one of the girls about it. (Matthew)

Even though the incidents of Todd talking to a male friend and Matthew having sex took place in the private space of their bedrooms, they audibly extended into public areas of their student accommodation. Their accounts therefore indicate the tenacity of public / private boundaries within these environments. They also illustrate that, in accordance to the previously noted work on the regulation of space (Bell et al. 1994; Bell and Valentine 1995; Browne 2007; Valentine 1996), ways of acting that are incongruent to heterosexuality are met with disapproval when they occupy public (and therefore



supposedly straight) settings – as demonstrated in these instances by flatmates verbally and physically distancing themselves from participants, and expressing their displeasure to one another, when participants' gayness is (or is thought to be) overheard.

In this section I have detailed a number of the micro-level processes which heterosexualise student accommodation space, and noted that these are often embedded within cultures of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities. I have argued that male flatmates' social displays of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity (articulated both physically through behaviours coded as hegemonically masculine and verbally through anti-gay comments and utilisation of the fag discourse) reinscribe and reinforce the heterosexual matrix through assertion, and thus contribute to the construction of these environments as straight. I have also examined flatmates' negative reactions when gayness is given voice and expression in public areas of their accommodation. In the next section of this chapter I further this focus on boundaries and transgressions through interrogating the ways in which flatmates regulated the sexual discourses in these spaces, and the strategies they employed to position and maintain heterosexuality as dominant.

#### **Section 4. Regulating sexuality in student accommodation space**

As noted above, although male flatmates' behavioural reinscription of particular gendered practices heterosexualised student accommodation space, there were instances when alternative sexual discourses were given voice and attention there (e.g. when female flatmates asked questions about participant's sexuality or participants talked about it themselves, and when gayness was raised in conversation, mentioned on television, or same-sexual activity was overheard). I briefly touched upon how, at these moments, the dominance of heterosexuality is challenged and threatened (Brickell 2000), with 'the sacred order ... constantly [being] at risk of violation' (Atkinson and DePalma 2009 p. 17). In this section I address the ways in which flatmates regulated this environment to ensure that, despite these occasional transgressions of gayness, heterosexuality was (re)positioned and maintained as the dominant sexual discourse. In other words, here I interrogate 'the workings of heteronormativities' (Oswin 2008 p. 98), as apparent in participants' reports of flatmates' homophobia.

In reporting incidents which mirror the victim stories of the gay student experience as detailed in Chapter 2, this section of the thesis bears the closest resemblance to the ‘typical’ literature on this population. Although in that earlier chapter I heavily critiqued the ubiquitous use of the martyr-target-victim model as a defining framework for gay life, here I demonstrate and argue that it is neither redundant nor inappropriate in situating some of my participants’ experiences. Indeed, cautioning against the sole focus on this model, yet also noting when it is applicable, is one of the ways in which I have tried to present in this thesis a nuanced and rounded portrait of gay students’ university lives. Also, the following accounts illustrate that my participants’ student biographies were shaded and defied simple categorisation as either victimised or non-victimised.

My [gay] friend on the ground floor [reported an incident of homophobia] because the guy who was living with him graffitied the front of his door, and he put like some really rude stuff on it ... I know my friend was really upset about it ... It was something like really really rude and graphic that was written on the door ... [The flatmate has] bitched about him a lot. He’s thrown drinks over him. He like got a pen and he carved some really horrible stuff on the door of his room.  
(Toby)

In this extract Toby relates how an openly gay student living in his halls (but in a different flat) encountered homophobia from one of their flatmates, and how this was expressed verbally, physically, and through property destruction. Toby’s description of this extended period of harassment indicates that it was at a comparable level of aggression to those extreme episodes recounted in Section 1 of this chapter. Furthermore, whereas negative words may have dissipated and the clothes that had drink poured over them may have dried, carvings on a door are permanent signs of anti-gay sentiment. This vandalism is therefore a lasting branding and territorial marker, a claiming and constant reminder of this space as indisputably straight.

We’ve got the corridor where we live in the flat, and they’d go up there nice and quiet then come down and scream outside my door, and bang up and down outside the door. And like laugh as I passed ... Jumping up and down outside my door and everything ... They wouldn’t say hi if they passed me ... My hair stuff once was smeared over the [bathroom] mirror and I was like oh hang on, that’s really childish. They knew that it was mine cos I was the only one using it and it was all by my things in my little basket thing. (Ollie)

Ollie's experience of being the target for a deliberate and prolonged campaign of harassment and victimisation from his flatmates mirrors that of Toby's friend, with homophobia manifest through a variety of intimidation strategies from verbal abuse to psychological games and property destruction. Both stories confound and caution against any assertions that all students are liberal and open-minded, and that contact with gay people inevitably leads to tolerance and acceptance. These flatmates did not express their disapproval of non-heterosexuality through snide comments or glances, but through aggressive 'shock and awe' strategies. Thus, these accounts illustrate just how vindictively homophobia can be expressed in higher education settings to deliberately victimise, intimidate, scare and hurt.

From a theoretical perspective, the harassment, homophobia and victimisation of gay students within university accommodation as reported above by Toby and Ollie can be framed as practices to (re)assert and (re)claim these spaces as straight through the repression of non-heterosexual discourses. However, explaining the incidents in this way does not acknowledge or capture the profound distress they had on the people targeted by these flatmates. Toby reported that his friend was *'really upset about it'*, whilst Ollie's account evoked a constant tension, anxiety and fearfulness of having to live with these people and not knowing when or how they would next attack. Even though he dismissed their behaviour as *'childish'*, Ollie later described how *'when I was in my room I felt very claustrophobic'*, indicating that he could not psychologically escape or find any refuge from his flatmates' harassment even in the supposed sanctuary of his private bedroom space. In fact, like a gay student in Epstein et al. (2003), such was the extent of this homophobia that Ollie decided to remove himself from the environment and transferred to alternative accommodation. His flatmates therefore succeeded in reclaiming their living quarters as straight through not merely repressing any transgressions of gayness, but expelling it from the space completely.

Incidentally, Toby and Ollie's accounts of homophobia in halls, and participants' reports of their flatmates' 'anti-gay' verbal discourse (above), indicate a gendered dimension to the public expression of anti-gay sentiment, with most (if not all) of these physical acts and utterances having been undertaken by male flatmates. Female flatmates' non-participation in physical acts of homophobia correspond to the oft-

reported gender differences in school bullying behaviour, that girls typically utilise implicit forms of victimisation such as rumour mongering, gossip and social isolation rather than physical acts of aggression (Turkel 2007; Veenstra et al. 2005). It may also be explained in part by numerous assertions that heterosexual females, both in general and in the student population specifically, tend to report more supportive and positive attitudes towards gay men than straight males (Brown et al. 2004; Liang and Alimo 2005).

Flatmates' physical expressions of anti-gay sentiment, as reflected in acts of harassment, intimidation and property destruction, were unequivocally driven by and reflections of homophobic intent. However, the reasons for the gay talk they directed towards participants were more opaque and ambiguous.

They call me 'straight boy' every now and then and stuff like that. (Toby)

She'd always say things like oh you gay, queer, fucking faggot, but I'd know she'd be joking. (Vivian)

On Facebook they'll leave a message, 'You mincer,' or something like that. (Matthew)

As previously noted, one function of gay talk and labelling in its guise as fag discourse is to display, assert and affirm a heterosexual masculine identity. However, its efficacy as an 'organising principle' (Kehily and Nayak 1997 p. 69) and a 'regulatory mechanism of gender' (Pascoe 2005 p. 329) in defining, policing and enforcing the boundaries of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities has also been documented (Kitzinger 2001). Here, such talk is operationalised against any male who deviates from dominant and accepted forms of sexuality and gender, by acting in one of the ways on the 'laundry list of behaviours' (Pascoe 2005 p. 337) coded as feminine, unmasculine and/or 'gay' (Pascoe 2007; Wilson et al. 2005). These include being physically close to other boys and aligning themselves with girls (Renold 2006), taking schoolwork seriously and embodying traits typically characterised as feminine (Duncan 1999), handing homework in on time and being smartly dressed at school (Epstein 1998), conforming to teacher authority (Nayak and Kehily 1997), being quiet (Kehily and Nayak 1997), dancing and caring about their clothing and appearance (Pascoe 2007),

not participating in peer talk about sexual experiences and prowess (Moore and Rosenthal 1993), not playing sports (Martino 1999) and lacking football skills (Swain 2000). Thus, boys do not have to self-identify as gay to be labelled as non-heterosexual (Silverschanz et al. 2008).

As being called fag is 'the worst epithet that one guy could direct at another' (Pascoe 2007 p. 55), and 'a hot potato that no boy want[s] to be left holding' (ibid. p. 61), the threat of being named as such encourages the display and reinscription of hetero-discourses, and conversely discourages, represses and silences others (Duncan 1999). Such is the wariness and fear of being labelled as not straight that boys often go to great lengths to monitor, police and regulate their behaviour (Anderson 2005a; Burn et al. 2005), investing in dominantly masculine activities to (re)position themselves within, and to reaffirm and reassure people of their commitment and adherence to, hegemonic masculine discourse and scripts of straightness (Renold 2001). In other words, fag discourse is 'a powerful device ... for whipping others into shape' (Woods 1990 p. 195) and for keeping males on the straight (and narrow).

As Toby, Vivian and Matthew's above extracts illustrate, some participants related that their flatmates labelled them with gay signifiers. The reported terms '*straight boy*', '*fucking faggot*' and '*you mincer*' can be read as derogatory and reflections of anti-gay sentiment. Indeed, name-calling is often portrayed as an act of harassment (Chang and Kleiner 2001), with such identifiers having an effective component in that they 'can stick to you, and can hurt' (Valentine 1998b [online]). However, as discussed throughout the rest of this section, participants tended not to interpret flatmates' anti-gay talk in these negative ways.

One or two [of my flatmates], they do actually make jokes ...  
But it's just like friends do that with each other, it's just sort of  
like banter. (Toby)

They joke along and they think it's funny and they like take the  
mick. Cos I quite like that, I like a bit of banter sort of thing.  
(Daniel)

It's banter isn't it. It's a way of getting on and communicating and having a laugh, not taking things too seriously and just telling jokes ... That's what it is, just having a laugh. (Noah)

In framing these utterances as 'ritual insults' (Kehily and Nayak 1997 p. 69) or 'insulting routine' (Tannock 1999 p. 319) by asserting that flatmates were merely '*tak[ing] the mick*' and '*just having a laugh*', participants removed any homophobic, hurtful or regulatory intent from this talk. In fact, Toby, Daniel and Noah all identified it as '*banter*', thereby interpreting flatmates' comments as discursive means of encouraging and strengthening group identity and cohesion, rather than being meant to offend, deride, insult, regulate or harm.

Jokes 'have considerable power in the dynamics of aggression' (Mizejewski 1999 p. 245), as alluded to by Freud's (1960) claim that wit is anger turned sideways. However, asserting that derogatory comments are merely meant for amusement and do not actually harbour malicious intent is a common discursive strategy, as in Billig's (2001) examination of three websites citing racist 'jokes' which all used such a disclaimer. As he states when unpacking such 'humorous' discourse, there is 'the need to look closely at the relations between humour and prejudice, especially in relation to the claim that a joke is just a joke' (p. 269). Ollie spoke of the difficulties in determining the intention behind 'anti-gay' utterances.

I think it's very difficult for people to say 'That was a homophobic statement you said' ... If my flatmate said to me 'You're so gay' is she just observing a point or is she being derogatory to me? The more physical side to homophobia obviously isn't subjective, but I think the verbal is more difficult to define as homophobic or not. (Ollie)

Other participants related how they acknowledged, interpreted and responded to social, situational and contextual cues to determine whether jokes and comments were meant in jest, or if there was homophobic intent behind them.

It would depend on who the person was and how well I knew them and their personality. If someone random came up to say it obviously I'd be really offended and say 'Fuck off you cunt'. (Vivian)

I think it's all to do with how it's said and in what context it's said. If someone just come up to me in the street and said 'You fucking fag' I would just be like OK I'm scared and I'd take offence. But if we were all in the kitchen with my flatmates and someone said 'Oh pass me the ketchup you fag' I'd just say 'Ha ha ha'. (Noah)

I remember having an argument and someone saying 'You puff' or something. And I think when you're using it in an argument then you're trying to make it out as a derogatory thing. (James)

These participants reported the dialogue in which the comments are embedded, and their relationship with the person making the remarks, to be factors in how they read and consequently reacted to these utterances. Thus, comments from people participants knew and got on with were taken as humorous and responded to in kind, but they were framed as homophobic, derogatory and offensive when made by strangers. How such talk was interpreted and responded to was therefore both contextual and relational.

In this section I have detailed how flatmates reinscribed the workings of the heterosexual matrix through physical and verbal acts which sought to (re)align gay students' behaviour to tenets of hegemonic heterosexuality, or eradicate it completely. In not challenging such behaviour, and / or re-framing it as non-regulatory and non-homophobic, participants arguably not only legitimised but also reinscribed heteronormativity themselves. I elaborate upon this argument regarding 'consensual heteronormativity' (Atkinson and DePalma 2009 p. 18) in the next section of this chapter.

### **Section 5. Negotiating heteronormativity**

In this section I continue my discussion on how participants (re)configured flatmates' behaviour that could be read as anti-gay and homophobic. Apparent in many participants' accounts were discursive strategies to downplay the seriousness and negativity of these incidents, and dismiss any homophobic intent from flatmates' gay talk. For example, Simon emphasised that although one of his flatmates held homophobic and heterosexist opinions, he himself had not been made the target of any harassment, stating '*He wasn't horrible to me or anything, or do anything nasty*'; Todd noted of one of his flatmates that '*he's not completely comfortable with it ... but he's not in any way abusive about it or anything*'; and Jack asserted that although a flatmate had

made a derogatory remark about a gay person, *'it wasn't a very nasty comment'* (although the incident nevertheless was significant enough for Jack to mention it in his interview).

Simon, Todd and Jack's accounts are characterised by reverse relative deprivation (Anderson 2002, 2005a), whereby gay people invest in ways of discursively diminishing any discrepancies between perceived and actual levels of support and acceptance of their sexuality. Relative deprivation occurs when comparisons are made to those perceived to be in a higher position than oneself. It refers to the psychological effects of desiring things which they have and you do not, but which you believe you are entitled to (Walker and Smith 2001). Such deprivation is therefore relative, not absolute (Bayertz 1999). Anderson developed the concept of reverse relative deprivation from his research on openly gay US male athletes. He noted that although his participants' spoke in very positive terms of their coming out experiences and of the acceptance and support of their peers, their accounts nevertheless included incidents of homophobia and heterosexism. For example, his participants stated 'It was nothing like I thought it would be. The guys were great and I can't believe I worried about it' (Anderson 2005a p. 86), yet later reported that as a result of coming out they had lost (best) friends, been called names, and that team mates had stopped training with and talking to them. Another example is where 'Charlie defined having only "two or three" players stop talking to him because of his sexual orientation as a good result because Charlie had expected to lose all his teammates' friendships' (2002 p. 868). Anderson proposes that the sense of relief his participants felt when comparing their actual coming out experiences to the often nightmarish scenarios they had expected, overly-inflated their sense of well-being – and it is this process he names reverse relative deprivation.

I do have some reservations regarding this concept, primarily because it is based on subjectivity – with regard to both the participants' perceptions and judgments of the levels of acceptance of their gayness, and an external judgment as to what their situation is 'really like'. In Chapter 3 I related my unease following the mistaken belief that critically engaging with my participants' data meant adopting the position of all-knowing researcher who is able to determine the objective 'truth' of how things 'really are'. It appears to me that reverse relative deprivation is founded upon the researcher assuming such a role.



Nevertheless, the concept is useful here as a possible framework for my participants' positive framing of flatmate behaviour that could be construed as anti-gay. Simon and Todd's flatmates may have held homophobic attitudes but they did not actually target these participants, and Jack's flatmate may have made a homophobic comment but it was not *'very nasty'*. In not being as bad as it could be (i.e. Simon and Todd's flatmates could have expressed their homophobic attitudes in acts of harassment and victimisation towards them, and Jack's flatmate could have made highly derogatory and hurtful anti-gay comments), these participants framed their flatmates' negative behaviour in positive terms, which thereby downplayed the extent of any negative attitudes and homophobic intent.

Even when participants did identify and acknowledge anti-gay sentiment in their flatmates' talk, they provided explanations, justifications (and therefore excuses?) for such feelings. These rationalisations included flatmates not having prior contact with known-to-be gays (*'He's not completely comfortable with it, but only because he hasn't met any gay people before'* [Todd]), harbouring traditional religious beliefs (*'He is a Catholic and I think that he still does kind of have a bit of a thing about it'* [Todd]), having been socialised in heterosexist and homophobic environments (*'I think perhaps it's because Poland [his flatmates' home country] has a history of being quite oppressive ... they are quite a masculine – like homosexuality is wrong – country'* [Ollie]), and framing such behaviour as a compulsory requirement in meeting cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity (*'They'll make all sorts of inappropriate jokes cos it's boys really, that's what boys do don't they'* [Noah]; *'Lads will be lads'* [Jack]; *'A lot of guys use derogatory terms and use gay terms'* [Matthew]).

In addition, many participants refrained from directly or unequivocally labelling these comments or their flatmates as 'homophobic'. For example, Matthew and Todd respectively stated that *'They're not actively homophobic towards me, I don't think they're really homophobic'*, and *'I don't think from either of them it's not blatant homophobia'*. Jake and Simon also engaged in discursive repair work when relating their flatmates' anti-gay sentiments through the addition of diminishment terms (as highlighted by the added emphasis in their extracts below).

He is *sort of quite* homophobic in a way. And another of my housemates as well is *almost like a bit* homophobic. (Jake)

I *almost* encountered it [homophobia] with him because of the way he was with me and how it was awkward in the beginning ... But then in a way to me the way he was in the beginning was *slightly* homophobic because once you know that someone's being sort of strange and distant because you're gay I think that's – well *it's not homophobia* but *it's just really silly* I think ... I don't think he ever was homophobic, *not seriously* anyway. (Simon)

As with all interpretive claims, participants' assertions that flatmates' anti-gay talk was banter, indicative of in-group inclusion and devoid of homophobic intent can be challenged and alternative readings proposed. For example, Derrida's (1976) semiotic concept of the trace (as briefly mentioned in Chapter 1), whereby signifiers retain (to varying degrees of potency) their historical associations, means that participants would have been aware that their flatmates' words originated from a vocabulary of intolerance, fear, victimisation and hurt. It is therefore questionable whether their framing and interpretation of this talk as mere banter completely removed all homophobic connotations from it. Also, in being 'a vocal branding of Other' (Thurlow 2001 p. 26), flatmates' use of the fag discourse to label participants (e.g. '*you mincer*', '*fucking faggot*') could be read as a reminder of difference and, in emphasising a detachment from the heterosexual majority, as a discursive distancing technique.

In failing or refusing to challenge their flatmates' anti-gay talk; excusing, justifying and / or removing any homophobic intent from these utterances; and allowing themselves to be objectified as '*you fag*', '*straight boy*', '*you gay*' and '*you mincer*'; these participants reconstructed and reinforced the heterosexual matrix and maintained it as the dominant, legitimate and privileged discourse in their university living spaces. As another example, Jake did not resist or problematise his flatmates' heteronormative wishes that their student accommodation remain straight and not be contaminated by the presence of alternative sexualities. His account of why he does not bring friends who were visibly identifiable as gay back to his accommodation to avoid encountering his flatmates' homophobia, is evocative of Jack's report, quoted in Chapter 5, of taking telephone calls in his garden so as not to rock the heteronormative boat at his home.

Gay friends like from choir I haven't invited them back to the house because I know that my housemates either might not talk to them or just take the piss. So I always say 'Oh we'll go to your house' ... Like some of my gay friends can be quite camp, and I think they'd take the mick ... Plus my gay friends in uni live nearer the uni than I do so if they came to my house it would be a more of a walk ... I don't think they'd say things to their face but I think they'd give me sort of knowing looks ... But cos I'm always the kind of person who wants to please everyone so I wouldn't want to offend – well not offend them, but sort of push the issue with them - sort of like 'Look, this is a gay person' sort of thing ... I know that they'd be like 'Eurgh'.  
(Jake)

This extract can be mined for insight into just how strongly flatmates' heteronormativity was exerted and experienced in student accommodation, even to the extent that some participants deliberately (and often with much work and trouble for themselves) modified their behaviour so as not to disturb or challenge the straightness of this space. Here Jake explains at some length why he takes pains not to allow gayness to have a noticeable presence in his accommodation, saying that he does not want to '*offend*' his flatmates by bringing his friends who are identifiably gay back there and thus make gayness visible in this space. Jake therefore locates himself in a sub-dominant and subservient position where his sexuality is something he feels the need to protect his flatmates from. He also frames bringing an openly gay person to his accommodation as '*pushing the issue*' with his flatmates, thereby equating simply making gayness visible to the forcible assertion of difference. He even (jokingly?) identifies sexuality as *the* major characteristic in his imagined introduction of one of his gay friends to his flatmates ('*Look, this is a gay person*'). Interestingly, Jake offers an alternative explanation mid-way through his account concerning distance for why he did not bring any of his gay friends back to his accommodation, rather than for fear of his flatmates' expected anti-gay prejudice following the heterosexual matrix within this space being noticeably troubled and disrupted. This can be read as a further example of participants working to refrain from framing their flatmates as heterosexist and homophobic.

Although talking specifically about the lesbian experience, Rich (1987) critiques such accommodation of and adherence to compulsory heterosexuality. She calls this non-resistance to straight discourses 'the most passive and debilitating of responses to political oppression, economic insecurity, and a renewed open season on difference' (p.

24), and advocates ‘taking a critical stance toward the ideology which *demands* heterosexuality’ (p. 25 emphasis in original). Rich views such submissiveness as reinforcing, reproducing and strengthening heterosexist dominance, arguing that in bowing to heteronormative discourses, lesbians’ desires and ways of being are ‘crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise’ (p. 27). Thus, in taking care not to disturb the heterosexual matrix and in not challenging heteronormativity, gay people are complicit in supporting and reinscribing straight ways of being. The status and power of heterosexuality therefore is not always maintained by those who occupy this position / identity but, through ‘an active system of organised consent’ (Atkinson and DePalma 2009 p. 20), also by those it regulates, marginalises, subordinates and represses.

One explanation for participants bowing to flatmate heteronormativity may be to maintain in-group inclusion, with not problematising straightness being equated with acceptance by flatmate groupings, and being a ‘bad’ gay with exclusion. Acceptance by these straight male flatmates appears to be highly important to some participants, as indicated by the considerable work they undertook in their interviews (as reported above) to frame these people as non-homophobic. Martino (2008) notes ‘the lure of hegemonic masculinity’ (p. 575) for gay men, and the seductiveness of being included in male flatmates’ heterosexual masculine practices could be one reason participants excused their anti-gay utterances. For example, following Hubbard’s (2008) statement that ‘conforming to a heteronormative ideal ... is associated with certain material privileges as well as political rights’ (p. 643), Vivian spoke of enjoying ‘*being accepted kind of as one of the lads*’ and being permitted to join them in ‘*like messing around in lectures and things like that, it was nice ... playing video games and things like that*’. He may not have been allowed to take part in these activities with his flatmates had he questioned their anti-gay talk and heteronormative practices.

However, some participants stated that there was a point when they would make such a challenge. These markers were personal and unique to each participant, with Todd stating that ‘*My own level of tolerance is when I don’t find it funny anymore, that’s when it becomes offensive*’. Some participants detailed how they had or would respond when their flatmates had crossed this line, which corresponded to a shift from the ‘good’ gay who does not make a fuss or an issue of his sexuality to the ‘bad’ gay who does bring it into the assumed-to-be heterosexual arena.

I remember somebody said something in the first or second month of uni and I was like 'Whoa'. I can't actually remember what it was. I was like 'Oh you can't say that' ... As long as you confront them and tell them 'Don't say something like that' I think they'll be alright ... I'd just be like 'You can't really say that' or 'I don't want you to say that'. (Toby)

Although Toby did not relate what was actually said to provoke his reprimand, his advocacy of challenging any statements that are framed as offensive and not letting them pass without comment contrasted with the typical portrayal of gay people as passive and disempowered. Also notable in this extract is that Toby based his charges on two different grounds, with '*You can't really say that*' alluding to the transgression of societal norms of decency and acceptability, whilst '*I don't want you to say that*' relates to the crossing of personal boundaries.

I might respond but in sort of a jokey way, saying something like 'Why do you have such an obsession with being gay?' (Matthew)

If they did go too far I'd take the piss out of them, say 'Straight people, eurghh gross', 'Oh women, eurghhh, nasty'. (Jake)

Matthew and Jake detailed how they would react to comments they found offensive in ways different to those proposed by Toby. Rather than '*confront them*' as Toby suggested, they stated they would make it apparent to their flatmates that they were uncomfortable with their anti-gay talk and comments in less direct and serious ways. Utilising humour may be a strategy to diffuse emotive and awkward situations, such as by Jake reversing homophobic into heterophobic dialogue ('*Oh women, eurghhh, nasty*'). Conversely, directly expressing displeasure and discomfort to flatmates may exacerbate tensions. In stating '*I don't want to be the sort of person that's in your face, like "That's offensive, you're offending me by using that kind of language"*', Harry also aligned himself with Matthew and Jake as a 'good gay' in supporting non-confrontational and indirect responses to flatmate talk experienced as offensive.

In this section I have examined the ways in which university accommodation was sexualised, detailing the physical and verbal practices by which flatmates' (re)claimed and maintained this space as heterosexual through safeguarding the heterosexual matrix.

I have also interrogated how participants reinscribed and legitimised the dominance of straightness in offering alternative interpretations of and not challenging flatmates' anti-gay behaviour to produce consensual heteronormativity. In being allocated places in university accommodation, gay students therefore have to position themselves and live in relation to dominant heteronormative discursive frameworks as constructed and reinscribed by their straight male flatmates, and decide whether, or how and when, to assimilate into or problematise these – or, in other words, choose between being 'good' or 'bad' gays.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have interrogated the ways in which the presence, behaviour and interaction of gay participants and their (known or assumed to be) straight male flatmates within halls of residence transformed this space from mere living quarters into a complex site for the production, assertion, enforcement and policing of discourses around sexuality. All participants had to negotiate this intersection of gayness, space and flatmate relationships. This was complicated by university accommodation being an environment hetero-sexualised through male flatmates' performative and verbal reinscription of hyper-hetero-masculinities. It was also somewhere the heterosexual matrix was strongly adhered to, with incidents of physical homophobia being a regulatory means of repressing and silencing gayness, and maintaining heterosexuality as the dominant sexual discourse within these spaces. Thus, the policing and regulation of straight space within higher education is not restricted to campus environments, but is as prevalent and potent within student living quarters. Participants' expectations of university as being somewhere they would be able to freely address and express their sexuality, as discussed in the previous chapter on their higher education choices, therefore were not completely met and required some qualification.

This chapter has also detailed how participants responded to such enforcement of heteronormativity by downplaying, rationalising and excusing flatmates' anti-gay attitudes and behaviour. I have argued that in framing flatmates' gay talk as mere banter, engaging in discursive strategies to rationalise these utterances, and not challenging heteronormativity, some participants reinscribed the heterosexual matrix within their student accommodation, and arguably legitimised the subordination of their own (homo)sexuality, themselves.

However, student accommodation also became temporarily queered through gayness being given occasional voice and expression by female flatmates asking participants questions about their gayness, and participants utilising a variety of pedagogical strategies to 'teach' their flatmates about their alternate sexualities. Although this space was sexualised in a number of ways, and maintained, re-claimed, (re)aligned and regulated as dominantly straight, participants had some agency in deciding whether to conform to or problematise flatmate heteronormativity.

As gay students are required to live, interact and socialise with flatmates on a daily basis, they need to be highly skilled in negotiating their sexuality within these groupings considering that they are, by default of their sexuality, located outside heterosexist definitions of acceptable ways of being. Such social sensitivity and awareness is displayed and discussed in the next chapter, which addresses issues surrounding participants' disclosures of their non-heterosexuality (i.e. 'coming out') to these flatmates.

**CHAPTER 7**  
***'I HAVEN'T GOT THE SOB STORY THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE':***  
**GAY MALE STUDENTS' CONTEMPORARY COMING OUT NARRATIVES**

[Coming out in halls of residence] can be absolutely terrifying. Because of the homophobia in the environment, the coming out process can be even more painfully slow and wrenching than usual. (Bourassa and Shipton 1991 p. 82)

This chapter continues to trace my participants' university trajectories as gay students, from choosing a university (Chapter 5) to arriving at the institution and forging relationships with flatmates (Chapter 6), and now to issues regarding the disclosure of their (non-hetero)sexuality (i.e. coming out). This focus on the ways in which participants negotiated their gayness within higher education continues in Chapter 8, where I analyse their bodily expression and management in university spaces.

Distinguishing between speech acts and physical performance in this and the following chapter is, however, rather artificial as language functions as both verbal and social action (Butler 1997; Ward and Winstanley 2005) since 'discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler 1993 p. 2). Coming out narratives illustrate this dual synchronicity particularly well, with each declarative statement of "I am gay / lesbian / bisexual" both labelling and socially positioning the self. As Bacon (1998) notes, these accounts 'describe a process of identity negotiation while simultaneously enacting that identity construction with their very performance' (p. 257). My separation of the verbal and the physical into distinct chapters is therefore primarily for reasons of thesis structure and chapter cohesion, rather than alluding to any intrinsic distinction(s) between them.

I frame my discussion on coming out with Williams' (1977) distinction of dominant, emergent and residual social practices (as described and discussed in chapters 2 and 3), as they map particularly well on to the different types of disclosure stories I interrogate here. Thus, in Section 1 I detail and deconstruct the prevalent (i.e. dominant) coming out tales in academic literature, which continually reinscribe queer as victim. In Section 2 I analyse my participants' disclosure narratives and, in comparing and contrasting them to these dominant accounts, I propose that they may be viewed as emergent stories. I also argue that coming out experiences are historically specific, and suggest that changes in



social, cultural and political climates for gay people can explain discrepancies between disclosure accounts. I also interrogate the data of the 4 participants who had not come out at university to gain an insight into how they experienced and negotiated living 'in the closet'.

### **Section 1. Dominant coming out narratives**

The disclosure of non-heterosexualities has frequently been positioned as a fundamental – if not *the* fundamental – story told about the gay experience. In his important work interrogating intimate accounts of personal life, *Telling Sexual Stories*, Ken Plummer (1995) positions the coming out story as a particularly significant example of the 'personal experience narrative', which he defines as 'the tale told by a person about the self' (p. 24). The rhetoric typically used to describe this process indicates its pivotal importance and unparalleled significance in the lived experiences of gay people. For example, it has been termed 'the most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person ... comparable in impact perhaps to the birth of one's first child in the heterosexual cycle ... [after which] life will never be the same' (Plummer 1995 p. 82, 84), 'a central feature of the experience of lesbians and gay men in the Western world' (Davies 1992 p. 75), 'a life-crisis event' (Herdt 1992 p. 31), 'fundamentally important to the dynamics of minority sexual identity' (Ward and Winstanley 2006 p. 313), and also 'important touchstones in personal history' (King and Noelle 2005 p. 279).

Coming out experiences have been labelled as 'perhaps the central area of academic research' (Davies 1992 p. 75) on gay people. Such attention may be explained by non-heterosexuality being an invisible or concealable stigma (Pachankis 2007; Ragins et al. 2007), and the heterosexual presumption thus rendering these disclosures a never-ending process (Hoffman 2005; Ward and Winstanley 2005). Indeed, coming out continues to be a staple and seemingly compulsory topic of engagement when researching this population, and I am aware that I am perpetuating this focus in including a substantive chapter on the subject in this thesis.

Coming out may be a shared narrative in the lives of many gay men. However, the context in which the disclosure occurs, and factors such as ethnicity and age, mean that each experience is also unique and imbued with personal significance and meaning (Dube and Savin-Williams 1999; Maguen et al. 2002). Nevertheless, although there is

therefore a multiplicity of coming out stories, one has attained the iconic status of mythic grand narrative. In interrogating this type of disclosure account, Plummer (1995) identifies the recurring themes of 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' (p. 16), which he asserts 'have their roots in classical stories of redemption and transformation' (p. 55). In addition to such common thematic content, Plummer proposes that the narrative structures of these accounts are also typically organised in particular ways.

There is a move from suffering, secrecy, and an often felt sense of victimisation towards a major change: therapy, survival, recovery or politics. Often harboured within is an epiphany, a crucial turning point marked by a radical consciousness raising. The narrative plot is driven by an acute suffering, the need to break a silence, a 'coming out' and a 'coming to terms'. These are always stories of significant transformations. (p. 50)

Other scholars have similarly framed coming out as a traumatic odyssey, describing it as an 'arduous developmental process' (McDonald 1982 p. 54) and a 'highly problematic practice' (Duncan 1996b p. 141) requiring 'strength and courage for this personal journey of self-discovery' (Windmeyer 2005 p. xi). Although the specifics and contexts differ, the majority of disclosure accounts reported in academic literature share a narrative detailing struggles over difficulties and adversity, which leads to either self-empowerment and affirmation, or rejection, victimisation, death and martyrdom. In (re)inscribing gay people a 'wounded identity' (Haver 1997 p. 278) of the 'tragic queer' (Rasmussen and Crowley 2004 p. 428) in this way, this body of work locates the gay experience within the prevalent martyr-target-victim model as critiqued by Rofes (2004) and discussed in Chapter 2. Indeed, these particular accounts have been (re)iterated and (re)told in numerous studies spanning decades (e.g. Cass 1984; Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; D'Augelli 1994; Evans and Broido 1999; Troiden 1979; Windmeyer 2005). Thus, although this coming out story of trial, adversity and suffering is very narrowly defined in terms of content and form, and chronicles only a certain type of experience, it nevertheless remains firmly positioned as the dominant disclosure narrative.

Plummer (1995) does make the caveat that 'there are, for instance, many same-sex experiences that fall outside of this pattern' (p. 60), and thus points to space for alternative coming out stories. Rhoads (1995), for example, reports that the majority of disclosure experiences of the gay and bisexual male students in his study were 'overwhelmingly positive' (p. 71), and Ward and Winstanley (2006) also offer a

refreshingly different account of reactions to coming out in stating 'it is easy to think that the emotional response to difference is always a negative one. This however is not always the case' (p. 309). Nevertheless, coming out stories which do deviate from dominant scripts are conspicuous by their atypicality. Plummer's (1995) statement that 'coming out stories are coming out everywhere' (p. 56) therefore requires refinement, for only a particular type of disclosure story is usually told.

### *Coming out at university*

The strategies gay students adopt when disclosing their sexuality at university are well documented (Gortmaker and Brown 2006; Rankin 2005). However, as indicated by Bourassa and Shipton's (1991) opening quote to this chapter, a review of these studies indicates that often they strongly mirror the 'typical' (i.e. negative) coming out accounts detailed above. For example, disclosures in halls of residence are reported to be 'a cause of extreme distress' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 127), and result in tensions with flatmates and rejection, harassment and victimisation (Bourassa and Shipton 1991). Despite describing his gay and bisexual male students' disclosures in positive terms as reported above, Rhoads (1995) concludes his article with the statements 'the process must also be understood in terms of its negative consequences' (p. 72) and 'gay and bisexual students who come out publicly must be prepared to face the kinds of harassment and discrimination described by the students in this study' (p. 73). It appears from such work that gay students have to be either silent about their sexuality and therefore susceptible to social, psychological and emotional difficulties, or be out and therefore targets for harassment and victimisation (Rankin 2005).

Coming out was a significant topic in my early studies on the lived experiences of gay students at a UK university (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999). These participants related much concern about disclosing their sexuality to their peers, and reported mixed reactions from unconditional acceptance to wariness if they did come out to them (excerpts from Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 18):

She was like 'Cool. You're my friend before, friend after'. (gay male, 22)

So everyone was OK with it except X who took a while to get used to it I think. He was a bit funny with me for a couple of days but he's OK now. (gay male, 18)

We concluded from this research that 'disclosing one's sexual orientation to flatmates was found to be a trying and complex process fraught with difficulties and uncertainties' (Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002 p. 21), thus aligning these reports to dominant accounts of coming out.

However, in my later study (Taulke-Johnson 2008) I presented a noticeably contrasting discussion of gay students' coming out narratives. Here I argued that although this process was indeed a source of some anxiety, both these participants and the people they divulged the information to attached markedly less importance and significance to the disclosure than typically reported in the literature. I also detailed how coming out could (and often did) lead to highly positive, supportive and accepting responses rather than those of harassment, rejection, homophobia and victimisation typically reported. Hence, I labelled these 'alternate' coming out stories (p. 121). I also suggested a paradigm shift when addressing these experiences which moved away from an inevitably pathologised portrait of gay students' lives, whereby the disclosure process is a less dominant (but nevertheless still important) concern, and where positive responses are acknowledged and engaged with rather than ignored or dismissed as atypical.

Coming out was a key theme in all my participants' interviews conducted for this present study. In the next section of this chapter I explore whether their stories mirror dominant conceptualisations of disclosure narratives in being organised around apprehension, fear, rejection and victimisation - or whether, like my 2008 study, they might offer alternative accounts of this process.

## **Section 2. Coming out considerations**

In this section I analyse my participants' coming out stories. I detail their disclosure status prior to university, what informed their decisions to come out / not to come out once they were there, the ways in which they made their gayness known if they did come out, and the initial responses to these disclosures.

### *Coming out prior to university*

Many gay youth acknowledge their sexuality to themselves whilst at school. However, the heterosexist norms and pressures pervading these settings and their home environments (as illustrated in discussions of my participants' home communities in

Chapter 5) mean they tend not to disclose their gayness to others until they arrive in the perceived to be more liberal, tolerant and accepting space of higher education (Rasmussen et al. 2004; Rivers and Taulke-Johnson 2002; Rofes 2005; Taulke-Johnson and Rivers 1999).

In contrast to the above reports, 13 (of my 17) participants had actually come out prior to attending university, with the ages they had done so ranging from 15 to 19. These 13 participants therefore had already told someone that they were gay. Accounts of subsequent disclosures often quickly following the first coming out experience (Dilley 2005) indicate that the process for many gay people is less daunting after they have been through it once. This may be one explanation for why many of my participants' stories of coming out in higher education, which I present in this chapter, lack the drama and intensity of dominant tales.

Furthermore, the majority of these disclosures made prior to university had been to parents, whom participants presented as being the most important, and most difficult, people to come out to. For example, Toby stated *'I'd already come out to like my parents and I think that is like the biggest one to tell'*, and Ben said that coming out to his parents was *'the most difficult thing, afterwards everything else is like slightly better'*. Framing post-parental disclosures as insignificant, unimportant and unremarkable may be another explanation for the particular types of university coming out stories my participants told.

However, regardless of the extensiveness of their individual pre-higher education coming out histories, all participants began their lives as gay students of not being out to anyone at university. Thus, issues of deciding whether to come out to their flatmates, of who to tell and who not to tell, and how and when to disclose their gayness, had to be addressed by all the sample. Some participants had even spent time contemplating the disclosure of their sexuality at university before actually arriving there.

I kind of ummed and aaahhhed about [coming out] in the couple of weeks before I first moved in. And I was thinking should I just come out as soon as I meet [my flatmates] and do it like that, or not bother [and] just leave it and wait and see.  
(Eli)

Looking back I didn't give it a second thought and I could have ended up [living] with loads of homophobes. But I just didn't think about it, I don't know why. I guess I was too excited thinking about other things like 'Oh my God I wonder who I'll live with'. Maybe subconsciously, but I wasn't losing sleep over it by any means. (Noah)

Eli had therefore considered questions of whether and how he would come out at university, thus assigning the process some importance. Noah, however, claimed he had given little, if any, thought to issues of coming out when anticipating what his experience as a gay student might be. Therefore, disclosure was not an all-consuming or predominant concern for many of my participants, and Noah's extract indicates that their coming out narratives (as discussed below) may deviate from the scripts of 'traditional' or dominant accounts.

#### *Reasons for coming out*

Once participants had actually moved into their student accommodation, deciding whether to tell flatmates they were gay was an issue they all had to address. A host of reasons deriving from 'incomprehensible, complex mixes of personal history and political agenda' (Silin 1999 p. 96) have been proposed for encouraging and facilitating coming out disclosures. In the 1970s, gay liberation movements urged the (pro)claiming of a public gay identity to deliberately problematise heteronormativity for political reasons (Lee 1977). More recently reported motivations for coming out include feeling 'the need to break a silence' (Plummer 1995 p. 50 as noted above), resolve tensions between public and private identities (Kelly 1992), not wanting to maintain a heterosexual façade (Moses and Hawkins 1986), being pressured to come out by openly gay people (Evans and Broido 1999), and for educational purposes to demonstrate that gayness should not be considered 'abnormal' (Humphrey 1999; Ward and Winstanley 2005). Such reports therefore position disclosure as moral and social obligation, psychological necessity, and strategic process. These reasons were also apparent (to different extents) in my participants' accounts of why they had come out at university.

For example, some related they told their flatmates they were gay because they did not want to expend energy on denying, repressing or disguising their sexuality.

If I didn't come out to them I'd be very much on my guard all the time, making sure that I didn't say anything or I didn't let anything slip. (Vivian)

If I hadn't had told them I was gay then I wouldn't have been able to act exactly as I wanted. I couldn't just have said 'Oh he's fit' or 'Oh here's my Delta Goodrum CD' or something like that. (Jake)

In addition, Noah stated *'It would be just too much effort lying, I couldn't be bothered'*, and Jack asserted *'I just didn't want to have to hide it so I told them'*. These participants had not come out because of the difficulties of maintaining separate, distinct homo- and hetero-sexual identities, or to absolve any detrimental psychological effects of managing incongruent public and private selves (Ragins et al. 2007; Reynolds and Hanjorgiris 2000) and 'living a double life' (Ward and Winstanley 2005 p. 450). Instead, they had chosen to disclose their sexuality so that they no longer had to continually monitor their behaviour to ensure against its unintentional 'leakage', and thus (at least theoretically) could conduct their lives at university as gay students openly and freely.

Some participants also identified honesty as a factor influencing their decisions to come out, but they positioned such truthfulness in relation to other people rather than themselves.

I wanted to have a bit of an open relationship in the sense of you're upfront and honest with everybody rather than having to hide things. (Jack)

By telling people who you are and what you are you're very upfront with them, you don't lie to them or anything. (Vivian)

Many participants argued it was both dishonest and unfair not to disclose their sexuality to their flatmates. They perceived the purposeful concealment and withholding of a part of themselves to invalidate relationships, as affiliations would be founded upon only a partial and incomplete knowledge of their selves and not a full understanding of who they were – thereby addressing the question 'is it possible to achieve an integrated

personal identity or have authentic relationships while concealing fundamental aspects of the self?' (Minton and McDonald 1984 p. 102).

You move in with these people and you get to know them, and so one other part of me they'd have to get to know was the fact that I'm gay ... I thought well it's a part of me so tell them.  
(Jake)

It's a big part of who I am and so to meet new people and to hide that from them would just not really make sense because they wouldn't really be getting to know me, they'd be getting to know only parts of me ... If you're trying to keep secrets well I don't understand the point of that, I might as well just be who I am. (Matthew)

These accounts reveal both a tension and contradiction between participants discursively downplaying the role of their sexuality and ascribing it little importance in their self-identification (as discussed in Chapter 4), yet here asserting that it was its very importance that actually encouraged their coming out to flatmates. Todd explained that he came out '*because it was part of who I am*', Matthew went further by saying his sexuality was '*a big part of who I am*', Noah further still by stating it is '*a really important part*', and Vivian here defined himself solely by his gayness in asserting '*It's what I am, it's who I am*'. Thus, the significance participants gave their sexuality was subject to change and fluctuation, and contextually determined.

Some participants therefore felt a moral obligation to tell their flatmates that they were gay, proposing that these people had a right to know who they were 'really' living with. As Vivian and Todd stated respectively, '*I feel that they deserve it*' and '*I thought that they had a right to know really*'. Coming out was here framed as a means of ensuring transparency. In equating knowledge of gayness with knowledge of the whole person, participants (perhaps inadvertently and unintentionally) further indicated the importance and significance they actually gave to this aspect of themselves.

If it was the other way around and one of my flatmates was gay and they chose not to tell me or it just came up at a much later date I'd kind of be annoyed because it'd almost be like they'd be keeping a secret. (Harry)



Flatmates themselves also believed that they should be told, as illustrated in Ollie's account of his flatmate's response when she became aware of his sexuality without him actually coming out to her.

She obviously had clicked that I was gay and she got quite upset that I didn't tell her. She said 'Why didn't you tell me you were gay?' and I said 'Well you don't come to uni and declare that you're straight so why should I declare that I'm gay?' I said 'When I met you you didn't say I'm C, I'm heterosexual, how are you? - so why should I?' And she said 'Oh but it's different and it's not normal, and I thought you'd let me know' ... I think she was a bit hurt that I didn't announce to everyone that I was [gay] – which I don't think I should have to. (Ollie)

Therefore, coming out was an affirmation of difference from the norms, expectations and assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality, which some participants thought it their obligation to tell their flatmates, and some flatmates expected to be told because – in the words of Ollie's flatmate above - *'it's not normal'*. However, in questioning why he should actually be obliged to make known his 'difference', Ollie problematised these assertions. He interestingly inverted the notion of not coming out as maintaining heterosexist dominance through silence, and instead argued that disclosures strengthened heteronormative tropes through continually reinscribing gayness as 'Other': as something different, unnatural and outside the norm. I return to this argument later in this chapter when discussing how participants actually came out at university.

In contrast to feeling the need to come out (for either themselves, or being obliged to for others), some participants' disclosures of their sexuality were undertaken for strategic reasons. For example, James and Vivian (below) respectively utilised the process to encourage and further social networks, and to gauge the strength and 'genuineness' of friendships. Incidentally, it is notable that acceptance of his sexuality is a key factor in Vivian's friendship selection, with positive reactions being the basis upon which these relationships are accepted, furthered and nurtured, and non-acceptance resulting in them being disbanded and terminated. This is another example of incongruity between participants' assertions that their gayness is not significant, yet it being the factor upon which some determine their friendships – more so than personality, likeability or shared interests.

I saw it as a way of getting friendship from them [female flatmates], because often if you say to a girl you're gay automatically they're your best friend [laughs]. So maybe that's why I did come out to them that night, cos I felt if I do you've got two friends then. (James)

You can test the friendship. If they wanna be your friend then they'd be fine with it, if they're homophobic then they're quite clearly not worth being friends with. It kind of separates the wheat from the chaff straight away. (Vivian)

James and Vivian's reports of coming out subvert the expected dynamics of the experience and process in a number of ways. Firstly, their decisions to disclose their sexuality had not been encouraged or prompted by feelings of needing to do so for reasons of personal integrity, obligations to other people, psychological necessity, or to pre-empt possible or inevitable exposure of their gayness. Not only had James and Vivian come out when they did not have to and of their own free will, but they had also done so for their own benefit and self-interest - in these instances purposefully telling people they were gay to gain friendship, assess their attitudes towards homosexuality, and consequently determine their suitability and worth as friends. In utilising these disclosures in such measured and strategic ways, James and Vivian repositioned coming out from being negative, necessary and imposed to something they took ownership of and manipulated for empowering and self-serving reasons. This again positions them as active shapers of their university experiences, and their coming out stories as different from dominant accounts of the process.

#### *Reasons for not coming out*

Despite figures from early studies that half of lesbian and gay undergraduate students are 'not at all comfortable' disclosing their sexuality (D'Augelli 1989b) and 97% are 'somewhat uncomfortable' doing so (D'Augelli 1992), coming out is nevertheless typically framed as both necessary and compulsory, whereby 'for some of us [gay people], to live outside the closet comes to seem a necessity, as basic as air' (Spraggs 1994 p. 195). The dominance of the disclosure ethos was also apparent in some participants' expressions of surprise when I asked why they had come out, with Matthew stating *'It's just natural to'* and Noah saying *'It was just like a no-brainer, like why wouldn't I?'* Nevertheless, four of my participants had, at the time of their interviews, chosen not to come out to their flatmates.

Coming out has been reported to be a 'life-affirming' (Silin 1999 p. 96) and empowering act, and is 'often represented as the substitution of pride for shame' (Herman 2005 p. 7). Conversely, not disclosing gayness has typically been framed as negative, disempowering and debilitating, primarily because of the identity management required to maintain non-heterosexuality as hidden – which, as noted above, requires significant work and energy. For example, Windmeyer (2005) talks of 'the pain of the closet' (p. xi), with this space typically presented 'as a zone of shame and exclusion' (Rasmussen 2004a p. 144). Being closeted 'can put an emotional pressure on the individual' (Ward and Winstanley 2006 p. 307), with the 'daily surrender of integrity and authenticity' (Lee 1977 p. 67) and 'a devilish Janus of daily compromise between [gay people's] erotic and social desires' (Herdt and Boxer 1993 p. 3) reportedly resulting in feelings of psychological stress, guilt, shame, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, social and emotional isolation, self-doubt, self-hatred and suicidal ideation because of not being able to 'live authentically' (O'Brien 2003 p. 15).

It is notable that none of the reasons these four participants gave for not coming out to their flatmates were related to 'the embarrassment of managing a potential stigma' (Ward and Winstanley 2006 p. 310), fear of responses of rejection and victimisation (Boatwright et al. 1996; Waldo 1998) or other negative reprisals and reactions to the disclosure (Cohen and Savin-Williams 1996; Gortmaker and Brown 2006). They did not use the closet as a place of safety or 'a survival strategy in an often hostile, oppressive, and marginalising environment' (Martino 2008 p. 589). As I discuss below, these participants did want to disclose their gayness but felt unable or were afraid to do so. Rather, they made considered, deliberate, reasoned and strategic choices not to write themselves into the dominant disclosure script 'that tends to unproblematically valorise the act of coming out' (Rasmussen 2004a p. 149).

Lack of closeness and intimacy with flatmates was a determinant in some participants' decisions not to tell these people they were gay. Ben stated that he had not come out to his flatmates '*cos I barely saw them*', and Andrew had not told his because he did not have friendly relationships with them.

I don't really see the point of it, in coming out to people that I wouldn't consider close friends, cos why should they know?  
(Andrew)

Andrew's explanation of why he had decided not to come out to his flatmates can be read as a defensive rationale, as indicated by him finishing his account by asking the rhetorical question why he should disclose his sexuality to them. In justifying his position, Andrew identifies and acknowledges it as atypical. His extract also problematises the assertions noted above by other participants of feeling obliged to come out to these people.

In contrast to the participants who felt the need to come out because they viewed their sexuality to be an important part of their identities and thus integral to understandings of their 'true' selves, others stated they had not disclosed their gayness because they did not attach any particular significance to this aspect of themselves.

I think the reason I haven't [come out to my flatmates] and that I've been happy not coming out to them is the fact that it's not a big part of my life so to speak at the moment. It doesn't kind of affect me and affect how I'm seen by other people at the moment. If it did I think I'd be more likely to bring it up ... If I did get a boyfriend I would probably quite quickly tell people about it I think. But I feel like if there's nothing happening, what's to talk about? (Eli)

Although he had not come out to his flatmates when his interviews were conducted, Eli did state that he would do so if a shift occurred and his gayness became an important factor. In this instance, disclosing sexuality was determined by personal perceptions of its significance, and the extent to which it shaped and influenced everyday life and experiences at university.

In presenting another reason for not coming out to his flatmates (below), Eli did further work to justify his closeted position more strongly. His extracts bring to mind Lee's (1977) statement from the era of gay liberation that 'since some homosexuals have gone public, the consciousness of those who have not has naturally developed to include defensive justifications for not going public' (p. 63). Like Andrew, Eli framed not being out as atypical. Also, explaining why he had not disclosed his gayness so thoroughly can be read as him feeling the need to defend against any questions or accusations as to why he was not 'out and proud'.

The reason I didn't ultimately [come out to my flatmates] was whenever I thought about bringing it up I ended up thinking to myself that I would be kind of putting a burden on the people I tell. I wasn't really too concerned about how I would feel about it, my worry was that I'd be kind of putting anxiety on them so to speak. (Eli)

Eli here reports that his reasons for not coming out to his flatmates were unrelated to issues of the self, but instead were founded upon how the disclosure would affect these people. Thus, his explanation for not coming out can be read as a variation on wanting to avoid the self being afforded a potential stigma resulting from claiming a public gay identity (Ward and Winstanley 2006). Eli transferred concerns of the repercussions of his coming out (which he framed as negative) on to his flatmates, and in not wanting to '*pu[t] a burden*' on them and cause them '*anxiety*' he justified his decision not to disclose his sexuality. Although it is not articulated what this 'burden' would actually be, it may be related to Goffman's (1963) concept of courtesy stigma, and the negative effects of being associated with a stigmatised person. However, there is a tension between Eli's reasoning here and his earlier downplaying of the influence and significance of his sexuality ('*It hasn't really played a huge part in my life to be honest since I've been here [at university]*'), for his gayness cannot '*burden*' people if it is of no importance. This discrepancy or slippage is another example of participants sometimes drawing upon incongruent arguments to support, explain and justify dynamic and variable self-positioning during their interviews.

#### *How to come out*

Many participants who had come out at university reported that they afforded the disclosure less importance and significance than in dominant accounts of the process. Nevertheless, they had spent time and thought deciding who / who not to come out to, and (as detailed in this section) also on questions of when and how. Thus, coming out was a concern and issue for participants, and the process was not care-free or care-less.

Stark differences were apparent in participants' concerns regarding coming out and the gender of who they were going to tell.

I told her on the first night I was gay, but that was because it was a girl. I had no real worry about telling her I think. (Jake)

You know that you're a lot safer doing it [coming out] to girls, in general, than you are guys. And then maybe I was probably hoping that it would filter through and then they could do all the hard work and tell everyone and then it wouldn't be an issue. (James)

I told two of my [female] flatmates. I told them first of all cos I knew like they'd go tell everyone for me, so they kind of did the job for me. So it was like yeah, great. (Toby)

Both Jake and James here spoke of their decisions to come out to their female flatmates first as being influenced by their perception of girls being more 'gay friendly' than males, with James reiterating his earlier comment that *'if you say to a girl you're gay automatically they're your best friend'*. This opinion was perhaps informed by these female flatmates expressing interest in participants' sexuality and, unlike their male peers, not engaging in overt behaviour that could be termed anti-gay (as discussed in Chapter 6). However, it has been reported that girls tend to express aggression, dislike and anger through indirect or secondary forms rather than physical ways favoured by boys (e.g. Owens et al. 2000). Thus, non-participation in these incidents does not necessarily mean female flatmates did not hold homophobic attitudes, but that they may not have been made as explicit, apparent or direct as male flatmates' *'Oh bloody gays'* utterances and intimidating behaviour.

James and Toby interestingly detailed how their coming out to their female flatmates was a strategic decision, undertaken in the hope that these people would pass on the information to the others in their accommodation. These participants therefore took advantage of the fact that *'telling some individuals a secret is equivalent to taking an ad out on the local radio station'* (Davies 1992 p. 79) to save themselves from having to make further disclosures. Although shifting the coming out responsibility on to other people in this way meant James and Toby surrendered control over the dissemination of the knowledge of their gayness, they welcomed with relief not having to come out to these other flatmates themselves. This again indicates that some participants actually experienced the disclosure process as a concern.

Predicting how people will react to coming out is reportedly a major cause of anxiety for many gay people (Mintz and Rothblum 1997). To appease such concerns, some participants engaged in strategies (although, as reported below, Will rejected this term)

to assess peers' attitudes towards homosexuality, and thus gain an indication of their likely responses to any coming out disclosures – or, as Will put it, of ensuring that he would be 'safe' telling people that he was gay. Participants then used the information from these everyday experiments to determine whether to ultimately come out or not. Undertaking such work demonstrates again the importance of the disclosure process to some participants.

I didn't tell them to begin with, I left it. And I mentioned an old boyfriend or an old girlfriend and I'd say certain things to see what they thought of gay people. (Jake)

In those first few weeks I was sort of like judging the whole situation and trying to learn how people were ... I wanted to sort of judge sort of what type of people they were ... I thought it's better to see how it pans out and just find out what they're like before I do it [come out]. And then I sort of had a sort of – well not a strategy for actually doing it, but I just had to be sure that I was sort of safe doing it I suppose. (Will)

Participants' reports of their flatmates' responses to them coming out (discussed later in this chapter) indicate that Jake's raising the topic of homosexuality in conversation with them to gauge their attitudes towards it, and Will's less pro-active method of simply observing them and '*see[ing] how it pans out*', were both relatively accurate means of predicting how these people would react to participants' telling them that they were gay.

Participants also talked of the ways in which they actually had come out at university. There is an interesting debate between Jonathan Silin (1999) and Didi Khayatt (1999) surrounding the coming out disclosures of LGB staff within educational settings – what Silin terms 'the classroom confession' (p. 97). In accordance to the previously stated arguments of coming out being celebrated and non-disclosure frowned upon, Sears and Willams (1997) criticise those 'many tenured full professors who are gay or lesbian continue to cower cowardly in the closet' (p. 4), and Silin (1999) asserts that such 'silence is a denial of pedagogical responsibility' (p.104). Coming out in these environments is typically framed as a positive, for it is asserted that gay educators who do disclose their sexuality in the classroom can support their LGB students, promote tolerance amongst the straight student body, problematise and disrupt heterosexism in the education curriculum, and challenge institutional homophobia by giving voice to gayness (Silin 1999).

In Silin's autobiographical account of coming out to his (US) graduate students, he relates that his disclosure was encouraged and facilitated by what he experienced as an incongruity between what he was teaching, and his pedagogical position as assumed-to-be-straight educator, stating 'it was disingenuous to lecture prospective teachers about the connectedness of lives and *not* talk about being gay' (p. 96 emphasis in original). Hence, for him, coming out was not a choice, but a personal necessity and pedagogical (and, perhaps, moral) obligation. Furthermore, Silin argues that the disclosure has been beneficial to his students, stating that they 'have begun to question their assumption about who can speak and who must remain silent' (p. 97) and that 'our conversations have become richer since I left behind the pose of objectivity' (p. 97).

Khayatt engages in debate with Silin over the way he came out to his students. Whereas Silin made an explicit verbal statement that he was gay, Khayatt asks 'is it necessary for him to spell out the secret of his sexual identity?' (p. 108). With reference to her own position as lesbian, Khayatt views such bald utterances to be 'irrelevant' (p. 111) and redundant when 'the specificity of coming out is subsumed in the speech and body cues that I provide and leave with my listeners' (p. 107). Rather than challenging heterosexist and homophobic assumptions through these declarative statements and public claiming of a gay identity, Khayatt advocates upsetting and destabilising (i.e. queering) the educational curriculum – such as by assigning her students short stories in which there are non-heterosexual characters. She reports how their reactions to such tasks mean that 'No, I do not need to come out in class to disrupt my students' tidy world of heterosexuality' (p. 109). Khayatt therefore, in Telford's words, 'refus[es] to behave as if queer sexuality were a secret requiring a declaration' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 106), which goes against traditional scripts of non-heterosexual disclosure.

A highly significant theme to emerge from analysis of my participants' coming out stories at university was their framing of the actual disclosure acts as non-events, which they achieved by relating them in pedestrian, matter of fact, undramatic ways. These reports contrast sharply with what can be termed 'traditional' coming out narratives, as illustrated when comparing the excerpts below from this and one of my earlier studies on gay students. Todd's breezy and dismissive account of coming out to his flatmates (from this study) is very different in both tone and content to the other more intense, emotive and dramatic disclosure story.



I just said 'I've got something to tell you' and then she said 'What is it?' and I just told her really. And the other guy was pretty much the same, it was just a quick sort of 'I'm gay.' 'OK, I accept it, you're still my friend.' It wasn't anything dramatic or anything huge like that. (Todd)

I thought 'Oh shit what have I done?' The boys were shocked. The girls started hugging me going 'Don't worry, don't worry, we're your friends'. Actually I was in sort of tears. (gay male, 18)<sup>40</sup>

My participants in this present study further positioned themselves away from typical disclosure scripts by frequently mocking the stereotypical coming out staging, which Daniel described as '*si[ting] everybody down and make a big deal and a big spiel out of it*'.

It's not like I go 'Hi everyone, can everyone please be quiet, I'd just like you all to know I'm gay' and then you know it's gonna be a big thing. (Will)

I didn't say 'Do you know what guys, actually I just need to make a little announcement here' ... Then that makes it an issue. That brings more attention to it, when it just needn't be. (Noah)

These extracts relate Will and Noah's strong aversion to the dominant and stereotypical coming out scenario of organising an audience and then making a very public and formal declarative statement of homosexual identity. Apparent in these participants' dismissal and mockery of such scenes was an unease with the focus and attention that these situations shifted on to sexuality - which Will and Noah perceived to be inflated and unwarranted. This was also reflected in Daniel's statement that '*that's like making a big deal out of it and it's just not*', and Harry and Toby labelling these ways of coming out as '*self-centred*' and '*a bit pretentious*'. Participants' dislike of turning disclosures into 'events' evokes the work they undertook in their interviews to downplay the importance and significance of their gayness in their university lives (as discussed in Chapter 4).

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<sup>40</sup> I obtained this data for my study which became published as Taulke-Johnson and Rivers (1999) and Rivers and Taulke-Johnson (2002). It appears in these papers in truncated form.

It is debatable whether gay people do actually come out in the ways that participants derided, or whether these means of disclosing gayness are fictional devices for dramatic licence (as in television programmes and films such as *Queer as Folk*, *Beautiful Thing*, *Hollyoaks* and *Get Real*). Nevertheless, Will and Noah's above extracts illustrate that some participants construed making grand declarative statements as the dominant coming out practice - even if, as detailed below, their own experiences actually bore little or no relation to it.

If that sort of subject came up then I'll just be 'Oh yeah, by the way I'm gay'. (Daniel)

It just came up in conversation ... There may have been something said like 'Oh that's so gay' and [I'm] like 'Dude, I'm gay'. (Ben)

It just kind of came up in conversation generally. Like they asked me if I was seeing anyone, I said no. And then they were talking about exs and I just kind of dropped it into the conversation about an ex boyfriend rather than actually you know saying ['I am gay']. (Harry)

In contrast to coming out through manufacturing and 'making a scene', these participants' disclosure strategies involved them deftly and skilfully assimilating the news that they were gay into a pre-existing flow of conversation. They therefore often told people when an opportune moment presented itself, such as when gay topics were being discussed, rather than disclosures being planned, deliberated or conceived as 'an event'. Coming out in such an offhand, low-key manner mirrored participants' framing of their sexuality as a secondary concern and of minor importance in their self-identification.

### *Responses to coming out*

Participants' coming out stories were further afforded 'new' status by their accounts of how flatmates initially reacted to the disclosures<sup>41</sup>. Responses to coming out have been reported to be correlated to a positive sense of self (e.g. Bowen and Bourgeois 2001) and 'central to the identity development of gay and bisexual male students' (Rhoads 1997a p.

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<sup>41</sup> A longitudinal study would have allowed insight into how these relationships were continued and (re)negotiated after participants had come out, and not just flatmates' initial reactions.

284). As a student's peer group 'is the most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years' (Astin 1993 p. 398), reactions to non-heterosexual disclosure at university are highly important. However, my participants' reports of their flatmates' initial responses to the news that they were gay, like many other aspects of their coming out experiences, did not map fully on to those usually presented in academic literature – which, as detailed in Section 1 of this chapter, seemingly inevitably 'involves confronting heterosexism and homophobia' (Rhoads 1997a p. 283).

This is not to say that none of my participants reported negative reactions, akin to those in dominant stories, when they came out. As detailed below, some flatmates responded by being '*on edge*', not talking to participants, and even terminating their relationships with them. These seemingly stemmed from flatmates' heterosexist opinions that gayness was, as Ollie's flatmate earlier stated, '*not normal*'.

When I told her she was like 'Oh, OK'. She's a lot more comfortable with it now, but she was a bit like on edge at first.  
(Toby)

[She] sort of tried not to believe it ... I think she just didn't know what to say to me, she didn't want to talk to me. And I don't think that's because she just suddenly disliked me, I think it's just she didn't know what to say ... I think she didn't really know how to react more than anything else, how to respond ... I got a bit upset that she did [act like that]. She came and apologised like that night so I mean it wasn't really a problem.  
(Will)

Clear in Will's extract is his repeated assertion that his flatmate's negative reaction to him coming out was a result of her not knowing how to respond to the disclosure, and not an actual aversion towards him or his sexuality. Will excused his flatmates' behaviour, with her swift apology cancelling the '*upset*' her reaction had provoked. Furthermore, both Will and Toby stated that their relationships with these flatmates were now improved, which served to again discursively dismiss any negativity and unpleasantness of these people's initial responses. Such repair work parallels participants' explanation, justification and excusing of their flatmates' attitudes and behaviour which could be construed as homophobic, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Ben's flatmate's reaction to him coming out was particularly extreme, resulting in not only a verbal and physical distancing, but a complete severing of ties and the ending of their friendship.

The guy thought I was coming on to him and I was just like 'No, dude, seriously, it came up in conversation and I talked to you. I'm not actually hitting on you. You have to learn when people are hitting on you'. And then he buggered off and doesn't talk to me anymore. (Ben)

Incidentally, this flatmate's reaction to Ben's disclosure illustrates some heterosexual males' assumptions that all gay men will position them as sexually attractive and desirable. As Toby noted, *'I think people have a tendency if someone of the same sex comes out to them ... they're like 'Oh does that mean they're gonna fancy me?'* In alluding to flatmates perceiving gay sexuality as predatory, uncontrollable / uncontainable, something to be feared and dangerous (and also, perhaps, contagious), Ben and Toby's accounts evoke the arguments in the equalisation of the age of consent debates by those who opposed the motion (Epstein et al. 2000).

However, just as my participants' coming out disclosures did not lead to incidents of victimisation and harassment, nor were they met with enthusiastic displays of support or celebration. The most positive reactions were detailed by Harry, who described his flatmates' as being *'absolutely amazing about it'*. No other participants reported such an effusive response. Instead, their coming out disclosures were typically met with quiet affirmation and murmured acceptance, with flatmates simply being *'fine with it'* (Simon) and *'comfortable with it'* (Todd).

Nearly everyone that I've told I'm gay has not really had a big deal with it ... They all seemed to be like 'Oh, right, that's fine, yeah'. (Jack)

I said 'I'm gay' and they were like 'Oh I thought so. Don't worry we're fine with it'. I turned round and said the same thing to H, she turned round to me and said 'That's OK'. (Vivian)

Participants expressed surprise at the undramatic nature of these responses, with Jake stating *'I remember thinking it would be a bigger deal than it is now, it wasn't that much of an issue really'*. Such ambivalence led Toby to assert *'nobody really cares'* about him being gay, and Harry similarly said *'I don't think for any of [my flatmates] it was really a consideration when they found out'*. Noah reported that his coming out was *'not a big issue [to flatmates] at all'*, and noted this discrepancy between his own experiences and the hegemonic construction of disclosure as a negative and nightmarish process.

I didn't have a problem. You hear these horror stories about people having horrific coming out stories, but mine was just really really fine, easy ... I do count myself lucky and I don't envy people that have had really hard times. (Noah)

In saying he was *'lucky'* to have had non-negative responses to his disclosures, Noah presents an awareness of the martyr-target-victim coming out stories, and positions these as dominant. Daniel also noted the atypicality of his positive disclosure experiences, stating *'I haven't got the sob story that some people have'*. This phrase is particularly telling as it demonstrates just how much cultural capital these victimised stories have as the normative templates of the coming out process. Thus, gay people may expect harassment and rejection to be the likely responses to coming out – which may have the ironic effect of keeping them closeted.

As Grierson and Smith (2005) note in their comparison of the disclosure experiences of cohorts of gay men pre, peri and post-AIDs, and echoed by Floyd and Bakeman (2006), coming out stories are shaped by the social, cultural and political context in which they occur. Thus, historical specificity may explain my participants' deviations from the coming out scripts of suffering and survival as described by Plummer (1995) and detailed in the opening section of this chapter. Plummer's work was published at a time when coming out as gay was a far more unusual, uncommon and unfamiliar process than it is today, with gay identities now *'normalised and de-exoticised'* (Grierson and Smith 2005 p. 67). The novelty, distinction, demarcation and difference of gayness has lessened in accordance with shifts in acceptance and more positive social attitudes, and this visibility and ordinariness means that *'the likelihood of an easy coming out has increased'* (Reynolds 2007 p. 90). It is therefore unsurprising that my participants' disclosure narratives are dissimilar to those of gay people who had to live out and negotiate their sexuality in secretive, secluded, covert, and hidden ways. Indeed, possible

reasons for the silence around alternative coming out stories, such as those reported by my participants, may be because they appear 'uninteresting' and 'unexciting' when compared to the grand, mythic disclosures made in earlier times when gayness still was the love that dare not speak its name.

Nevertheless, my participants' coming out accounts do indicate that dominant disclosure stories are not wholly appropriate in reflecting and framing understanding of contemporary stories and experiences. I return to and elaborate upon this argument in Chapter 9.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter I detailed how a particular type of coming out story, which frames the process as a journey of trial and suffering, is positioned as dominant through being continuously reinscribed and reported in the literature. Plummer's (1995) statement that coming out stories, 'like all good stories ... have been replayed, copied and borrowed over and over again' (p. 49), is clearly reflected in the body of work on these experiences. I do not question that, for some gay students, coming out is difficult, problematic, distressing and even dangerous. Nor, as illustrated in my above analysis, was the process entirely worry-free, unimportant or insignificant for all my participants. However, one of the main arguments of this study is that the constant (re)telling and (re)iterating of these 'traditional' stories and non-acknowledging or reporting of alternative narratives restricts understanding of and insight into the richness, diversity and nuances of gay students' university experiences. I therefore propose that such contemporary and 'new' (i.e. emergent) stories of the gay experience (such as those reported in this thesis) should be engaged with, even if they lack the drama and intensity of dominant accounts.

Although there were some similarities, participants' disclosure stories and experiences typically deviated from (and in some cases bore no relation to) the scripts of seemingly ubiquitous 'brave tales of coming out' (Windmeyer 2005 p. xi). The differences can be summarised thus: although disclosure at university was a major concern for some participants, others did not give it much attention or consideration; coming out is typically presented as a process gay people are forced into or feel they have to do, but my participants also noted strategic, empowering, pragmatic and considered reasons for

choosing to come out; coming out was not felt by participants to be a compulsory process, and those who had not come out did not report an array of negative consequences or disempowerment from being closeted; the ways in which participants came out were low-key and dismissive rather than being formal 'events' where declarative statements about sexuality were made; and most responses to disclosures did not map on to those of rejection and homophobia. I have flagged up differences in historical context as a possible reason for these discrepancies between my participants' coming out accounts and those positioned as dominant, and return to this important point that different times give rise to different stories in the Conclusion of the thesis.

However, before this I further my discussion on the ways in which participants negotiated their sexuality within higher education, and in the next chapter I analyse their bodily management, regulation and performance in university space.

## CHAPTER 8

### ***'I'LL BE MYSELF WHEREVER I GO':***

### **GAY PERFORMATIVITY AND VISIBILITY IN UNIVERSITY SPACE**

Gay men *act* as a matter of daily life. (Sikov 2008 p. 87  
emphasis in original)

In this chapter I deconstruct the ways in which participants expressed, negotiated, and in some instances asserted, their sexuality and identities as gay students in university spaces through their bodily performance. Through examination and exploration of their perceptions of the degree to which these environments were organised and regulated by the heteronormative workings of the heterosexual matrix, and the extent to which they allowed the expression of alternative identities, I argue that (as Sikov's (2008) above quote suggests) participants were highly sensitive and skilled social actors in physically performing and negotiating their identities as gay students within university spaces.

The analysis I present in this chapter is informed heavily by work on human geography, and specifically the production, policing and transgression of space which is assumed to be 'naturally' heterosexual. I have already discussed this topic and linked it to the study's aims and objectives in Chapter 1, touched upon it when interrogating participants' university choices in Chapter 5, and drawn upon it to provide a theoretical framework for the (hetero)sexualisation of student accommodation space in Chapter 6. Thus, in Section 1 of this chapter I immediately begin my analysis and address how participants read spaces within university and managed their behaviour accordingly – be it to assimilate into or to transgress the norms, assumptions and expectations of the dominant heterosexual discourse. I focus on the Students' Union as participants identified it to be a particularly challenging site for gay students in terms of the performative management and expression of their sexuality. In Section 2 I examine the ways in which participants purposefully and (in some cases) aggressively made visible and explicit their gayness, and their strategic reasons for engaging in such behaviour. Together with the previous chapter on participants' verbal articulations of the self as apparent in their coming out stories (Chapter 7), this focus on practice and performance furthers insight into the varied means by which my participants produced, managed and negotiated their sexuality at university – i.e. how they 'did gay'.



### Section 1. University space

Many participants were aware of the straightness of non-university spaces, experiencing them as 'ambient[ly] heterosexual and implicitly homophobic' (Murray 1995 p. 67), and self-regulated expressions of their sexuality accordingly. As detailed in the Introduction (Chapter 1), wariness and fear of becoming the target of the regulatory workings of the heterosexual matrix mean that gay people may engage in various forms of impression management to prevent being identified as non-heterosexual in public spaces. These can involve passing as straight, as in creating and enacting a fiction of heterosexual identity, and also de-gayng a social self through the censoring or erasing of behaviour signalling non-heterosexuality (which Griffin (1992) describes as covering rather than passing). Some of my participants reported investing in this latter practice, whereby they sought to downplay or render invisible behaviour that could be read as being indicative of their gayness. For example, Todd stated that *'I probably wouldn't walk down the street holding hands with someone like a straight couple would'*.

One way participants conveyed their understanding of the heterosexist nature of public space was through unfavourably comparing it to university environments, in terms of the extent to which they felt they had to monitor and censor behaviour which could be read as reflecting their gayness in the different settings.

I would feel far more comfortable being openly and outwardly gay around uni[versity] than I would around town. (Matthew)

I would probably rather walk around university holding hands with my boyfriend than walking round town holding hands with my boyfriend. I definitely feel a lot more secure around university. (Harry)

Matthew and Harry stated that they would feel less restricted and be more likely to engage in open displays of their (non-hetero)sexuality (such as holding hands with a same-sex partner) in university space than around the city in which the institution was located. The words these participants used to describe how they felt in university spaces ('comfortable', 'secure') related to safety and security, and in saying that they were *'far more comfortable'* and *'a lot more secure'* (emphasis added) they further differentiated how they perceived and experienced university and non-university environments as gay students. Matthew and Harry therefore alluded to the pressure to align oneself to

dominant heterosexual discourses as being less potent on campus environments than non-university spaces.

Toby and Ollie also positioned university space more favourably than non-university space with regard to how they could physically express their gayness. Both these participants reported feeling it necessary to invest in self-regulation when in the city and in their home communities, but not when occupying university space.

If I was shopping down town I don't think I'd do it [hold hands or kiss my boyfriend] there. Cos this city is kind of like – well I don't exactly want to say backwards because that sounds really really harsh, but it might be a bit 'traditional' ... With students you do get people now and then who won't like see something from anybody else's point of view at all, but I think students they do tend to be more accepting just in general. (Toby)

[At university] I just say what I think and I'm not always covering up. Cos if I get quite excited or passionate about a subject then my camp levels go up, but I can confidently do that in my lectures without people thinking oh what's going on? What's happening? ... You can do what you want [at university], whereas when I go home I am quite conscious of how camp I am sometimes, and what I'd wear down the pub. I'd tend to butch it up a bit. (Ollie)

Toby's reluctance to openly express his gayness in the city space was informed by his perception that the people there harboured '*traditional*' (i.e. heterosexist) attitudes. In framing students as being more understanding and accepting of difference and diversity, Toby explained why he felt more comfortable and able to freely performatively display his sexuality at university.

Whereas Toby drew upon the city to illustrate his comparison between university and non-university spaces, Ollie described his home environment. As detailed in Chapter 5 regarding him being 'the only gay in the village', Ollie presented this setting as saturated with assumptions and regulations of compulsory heterosexuality. He was very much aware that his body language made transparent his sexuality, and so felt obliged to monitor and regulate his behaviour when in this space to align it to the traditional gender and hegemonic masculine roles, expectations and norms that his village valued. Indeed, such was the perceived pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality,

heterosexism and homophobia in his home community that Ollie instigated such behavioural management (such as by monitoring his levels of campness and clothing when in the village pub) even though he was fully out there.

These participants therefore framed non-university spaces as being governed by compulsory heterosexuality, and reported that consequently they were less likely to express their sexuality physically there than in university environments. Because of the perceived heterosexism and homophobia of non-university space, some participants engaged in the self-policing practices of downplaying and refraining from behaving in ways which could be coded as 'gay', and in Ollie's case adopting a pretence of heterosexuality (*'I'd tend to butch it up a bit'*). In these instances, participants adapted their physical performance to assimilate into the heterosexism of public space and not to problematise, challenge or disrupt its boundaries of (un)acceptable conduct. Such behaviour mirrors their non-challenging of, and adherence to, flatmates' heteronormativity (as discussed in Chapter 7), and similarly may also be read as participants self-reinscribing and legitimising the dominance of straightness in repressing and erasing the visibility and presence of their own non-heterosexuality.

However, some participants did assert that although they noted the regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality operating within non-university space, they would not and did not change their behaviour in any way so as not to trouble the ubiquitousness of straightness.

I am aware of [heterosexist boundaries in public space] but I try to ignore it as much as I can ... I don't feel like I have to hold back or anything like that ... No, I don't mind my behaviour.  
(Todd)

I'll be myself wherever I go ... I wouldn't ever sort of hide it ...  
It's because that's who I am and I'm not gonna change it. (Will)

Thus, in contrast to Toby and Ollie (above), Todd and Will inhabited the roles of 'bad homosexuals' because, rather than disguise or downplay their gayness in accordance to the expected, assumed and dominant (hetero)sexual discourse, they maintained their visibility as alternative and different. Will's reasons for doing so were related to personal integrity, his assertions that he would not alter behaviour which indicated his

sexuality being founded upon a desire to be honest and true to himself (*'It's because that's who I am'*).

### *Students' Union*

Many participants therefore positioned university space as less restrictive and stringent in the policing and regulation of non-heterosexual discourses than non-university spaces. However, some identified the Students' Union as a university space which posed particular challenges for gay students regarding behavioral management and expressions of sexuality. Telford notes this environment to be 'threateningly straight' (Epstein et al. 2003 p. 138), and some of my participants also perceived and experienced it as a rigidly heterosexist and exclusionary site for gay students. This opinion was informed by and derived from both the events that took place in the Students' Union, and the type of people who frequented this space.

Things like these freshers' nights, like that traffic light party<sup>42</sup> for example, the whole thing seems to be angled at getting people together and I don't think gay people really fit into that because people sort of overlook it I think ... Anything that is about being a couple or anything like that will solely be aimed towards straight people. (Will)

I wouldn't go there with the intention of pulling anyone I don't think cos it does all seem to be really quite large lads wearing rugby shirts. Not that it's a frightening experience, but it's not the kind of venue you go to pull anyone I don't think. (Jack)

Will felt that by hosting straight-biased proceedings and not acknowledging alternative sexualities, the Students' Union marginalised gay students and rendered them invisible. In advocating and reinscribing discourses of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, this space was positioned as a site for the workings of the heterosexual matrix. Jack alternatively identified the space's 'straightness' as being asserted and policed by the male students from sports societies who populated it. In stating that he would not engage in any behaviour which could be read as gay within the Students' Union because of the presence of these students, Jack positioned them as regulators of compulsory heterosexuality (and also hegemonic masculinity) in this space. These

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<sup>42</sup> A participant in one of my earlier research projects described this event as *'You wear one of three colours – you wear red if you've got a partner and aren't up for anything, you wear green if you're up for anything, and you wear orange if you're a bit ambiguous'* (Taulke-Johnson 2008 pp. 124-125).

students were thus perceived to embody the 'heterosexual laddishness' (Epstein and Johnson 1998 p. 166) of participants' straight male flatmates discussed in Chapter 6. Jack's reluctance to transgress the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour did not align with his assertion that he was not wary of the heterosexism of the Students' Union or these students from the sports societies (*'Not that it's a frightening experience'*). It also indicated that even though regulations governing and dictating appropriate conduct in this space may have been implicit and unarticulated, they were nevertheless palpable and potent.

Other participants also positioned these ultra-straight, ultra-masculine students in regulatory roles. Even Toby, who enjoyed socialising in the Students' Union, stated *'I don't think I'd go like on Wednesdays when all the jocks and all the societies go out, I think I might be a bit funny about it then ... Somebody might say something on a night like that'*. Matthew also advised that gay students not frequent this space at times when it became hyper-heterosexualised by the presence of these groups.

A Wednesday night is probably not the best night to go with all the sporty people there ... It's the night that all the Athletics Union people go out and I get the impression it's probably not the most welcoming environment. I'm sure we wouldn't get any trouble, just like if we go to a straight club in town there's no trouble, but I just think that there would be better times to go.  
(Matthew)

Toby and Matthew therefore echoed Jack's recommendation (above) that gay students modify and adapt their behaviour to be either in accordance to the heteronormative discourses operating within the Students' Union, or to avoid the space altogether - even though, as Matthew noted, he had never actually experienced any negative incidents in such 'straight' environments. His statement *'I just think that there would be better times to go'* diluted his assertion and positioning of the Students' Union as 'gay friendly'.

Although Toby had advised that gay students not populate the Students' Union at times when he perceived compulsory heterosexuality to be particularly evident and potent there, he later presented a very positive account of this environment in allowing him to freely and openly express his sexuality.

When we're out in the [Students'] Union nightclub I'll just act like I'm out normally if I went to a gay club .... It's one of my favourite places to be actually, it's really really good. Everybody is students as well so I think everybody is more accepting. Like I don't think I could go to like a straight club in town and like kiss my boyfriend or something ... It's a nice sort of safe environment I suppose ... It's only students that are let in as well [so] you don't have to worry about getting all the chavtastics in. (Toby)

Toby contradicted his earlier evaluation of the Students' Union as a hyper-heterosexist space, here asserting that he did not have to monitor or adapt his behaviour there, describing it in highly positive terms (*'It's one of my favourite places to be', 'it's really really good'*), and even likening it to a gay club with regard to the extent it permitted the open, unrestricted and *'safe'* expression of his sexuality. His positioning of students as more accepting of and tolerant to difference than non-students also did not map on to his earlier descriptions of *'all the jocks'* who policed the straightness of the Students' Union, and led him to recommend that gay students not occupy this space at the particular times these people were there.

Toby's contrasting views of the Students' Union can be explained by space being embedded in time, and not atemporal. Hence, his evaluations of this environment as being (un)safe for gay students were dependent upon whether they frequent it when *'all the jocks'* were present or not. This dynamic and temporal nature of space and place is illustrated by same-sex couples feeling uncomfortable eating at restaurants on Saturday evenings or on Valentine's Day, this being a time when these places become *'hyperheterosexual'* (Browne 2007 p. 1009). Gay people therefore not only have to negotiate their identities in accordance to spatial regulations, but also with sensitivity to the shifting temporality of these environments.

However, not all my participants perceived the Students' Union to be a space completely intolerant of overt displays and expressions of gay identity.

I'd be really really shocked if anyone in there behaved anything more than like perhaps laughing or pointing. Anything more I'd be really surprised. No, I can't imagine anyone ever like trying to start an argument about it in the [Students'] Union. And I go like once or twice a week. (Harry)

I would be surprised if any of those people [who view the Students' Union as homophobic and LGB-intolerant], I mean I might be completely wrong, have actually gone into the Union and actually been beaten up for being gay. I would think it's their perception of it and they are more worried of what would happen if they were open ... I think a lot of people would be surprised at how OK people [in the Students' Union] are with it. I've never ever had any problems really, and if I do have someone shout something at me I shout back at them and they back down ... I've been completely myself in there and never had any problems. (Will)

Apparent in Harry's account is reverse relative deprivation (Anderson 2005a), which has been noted and discussed in Chapter 6 with regard to participants' framing of their male flatmates' 'homophobic' behaviour. Although Harry said that acting in ways that could be read as gay in the Students' Union may provoke a reaction of *'laughing or pointing'*, he nevertheless positioned this as a positive response in relation to it not resulting in *'anything more'* negative. Such a discursive strategy meant that Harry could state that gay students may encounter intolerance and the regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality within this space, yet concurrently present it as accepting of expressions of non-heterosexuality.

A similar tension was apparent in Will's assertion that perceptions of the Students' Union as heterosexist and homophobic were unfounded. Although reporting that he had not experienced any *'problems'* in this space as a result of openly expressing his gayness, he then stated that he had had *'someone shout something at me'*. Thus, even though Harry and Will both presented the Students' Union as 'gay friendly', their accounts nevertheless indicated not only the presence but also the implementation of regulatory mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality (in these instances public humiliation and reprimands by laughing, pointing and shouting) in this space to police, regulate and silence alternative sexualities.

Despite such (often draconian) regulation and (often intense) pressure to conform to the dominant heterosexual discourse, the 'fabricated and fragile' nature of straight space means there is nevertheless opportunity to trouble, resist and challenge heteronormative assumptions regarding 'the natural order' and 'the way things are'<sup>43</sup> (Johnson 2008 p.

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<sup>43</sup> These being fundamental objectives of queer theory (Luhmann 1998; Russell et al. 2002).

566). Just as Will stated he had not downplayed his gayness or adopted a heterosexual facade in the Students' Union (*'I've been completely myself in there'*), and Toby related he felt able and comfortable engaging in acts of physical intimacy with his boyfriend there, so other participants detailed incidents when they had openly expressed their sexuality in this space. In 'queering' the Students' Union in these ways they had engaged in acts of transgression, with 'the disorganisation and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt[ing] the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence' (Butler 1999 p. 362), and creating 'a small fissure in hegemonic heterosexual space' (Valentine 1996 p. 151).

These repudiations were typically produced through displays of physical affection towards someone of the same sex. Some of these actions were fleeting and unintentional, such as Harry who stated the he had *'pulled'* someone in the Students' Union, but ascribed this behaviour to being *'only because I was really really drunk, I'd never normally do that'*. In this context, Harry's account of his decrease in self-regulation and increase in overtly gay behaviour can be explained as resulting from alcohol relaxing his psychic defences, and therefore that which was typically sublimated and repressed was allowed voice and expression.

Such transgressions were also accomplished through taking advantage of the opportunities of 'playing with gender' (Richardson 1996 p. 8) that the Students' Union sometimes permitted – and even encouraged.

The last time we went [to the Students' Union] was for my friend's birthday party and we all went dressed as sailors. So there was quite a few of my mates who were dressed in quite a camp manner ... People were just having a little bit of a giggle at them. (Jack)

If I were inclined to and I went [to the Students' Union] dressed up in drag I don't think anyone would bat an eyelid. They'd just assume that I was part of a social [event] or someone was having a fancy dress event. I've been to the Union dressed up as a massive chav, dressed up as like silly things like tennis players and a pirate and stuff, and I've never had any funny looks whatsoever. Like the rugby team have had socials in there where they go all wearing just women's underwear and no one bats an eyelid. (Harry)



In allowing behaviour incongruent to traditionally established and regulated norms of gender and sexuality, the Students' Union paralleled the Medieval carnival (Bakhtin 1984), which was 'a playful and pleasurable revolution' (Presdee 2000 p. 42) allowing 'a permissible rupture of hegemony' (Eagleton 1981 p. 148). Indeed, such was the perceived elasticity and flexibility of rules governing permissible gender and sexual identity within the Students' Union that Harry stated *'If I saw two guys pulling in there my first reaction would be that it was a dare or a joke rather than two actual gay people just pulling'*.

However, Jack and Harry's above accounts of 'otherness' in this space indicated that acceptance and positive reactions to any such deviations were contingent upon them being identified as obvious performance and not 'true' reflections of identity. This proviso is evident in Harry's extract when he related that the rugby team has no qualms about wearing *'just women's underwear'* there. These students' hefty identification with heterosexual masculinity, as derived from their sport affiliation, meant their behaviour was not framed as a genuine desire to cross-dress, and their heterosexuality and masculinity was not in any way questioned or challenged. Thus, as Harry stated, *'no one bats an eyelid'*. Such masculine capital also explains why openly gay males who adhere to scripts of hegemonic masculinity and are able to display aspects of compulsory heterosexuality (for example, through sporting prowess and by being tough, macho and competitive), can be accepted by their peers in spite of their non-heterosexuality (Anderson 2005a; Epstein and Johnson 1998). Embodying and displaying masculine and heterosexual traits may therefore compensate for a gay identity, and also allow straight males to engage in homo-erotic and gender atypical performance without their sexuality being questioned.

In being an arena for the enactment of performances which did not always adhere to the binary divisions of heterosexuality / homosexuality, masculinity / femininity and even man / woman, and the resultant muddying of the rules of compulsory heterosexuality and what was deemed (un)acceptable behaviour within this space, the Students' Union was a complex site for gay students to inhabit and negotiate expressions of their sexuality. Nevertheless, as in Harry's excerpt below, some participants strategically utilised this bending and opaqueness of gender regulations and sexual identity to express their gayness freely. They knowingly took advantage of the understanding that

any behaviour explicitly coded as 'gay' would most likely be viewed as performance and parody (i.e. not an indication of their 'true' sexuality), and therefore could be undertaken with little concern for heteronormative regulatory measures, reactions or reprisals.

I remember holding hands with [my boyfriend] and walking around. But the thing is so many straight people do that as like a joke or a laugh anyway in there ... We were in a booth and apparently no one even batted an eyelid. (Harry)

Harry's transgression was most interesting in that it was both explicit in the sense that he overtly expressed his gayness, yet also implicit because people did not realise that this behaviour was a reflection of his 'true' sexuality. Like the ultra-feminine 'lipstick lesbian' and the ultra-masculine 'gay skinhead' (Bell et al. 1994), Harry transgressed the space invisibly through assimilation and 'blending in' with the behavioural codes of hegemonic heterosexuality - although this raises the question whether his behavior is actually transgressive if it is not recognized or marked as such.

Harry related how he had not been targeted or punished following openly expressing his sexuality in the Students' Union (*'no one even batted an eyelid'*), whereas Will had earlier stated that he had been shouted at when he had done so. I propose that this discrepancy was due to students in this space equating homosexuality with gender role atypicality (Waldo et al. 1998) and supporting the 'sex-role stereotyping' (Butler 1999 p. 363) and 'inversion theory' (Schneider 2004 p. 490) that effeminate males must be gay and masculine males must be heterosexual (Connell 1995; Savin-Williams 1995). Harry was 'straight-acting' (i.e. his behaviour could be coded and read as heterosexual, and not gay) in his interviews, and hence his engagement in same-sex intimacy in the Students' Union was 'written off' as an act and thus a 'safe' transgression. Will, however, was rather less masculine in his body language, and stated himself that *'I think people probably can tell'* he was gay. Therefore, his participation in non-heterosexual behaviour was regarded as a signifier of a genuine alternative sexual identity, and viewed as an actual threat or challenge to the dominance, stability and ubiquity of compulsory heterosexuality. As a result, he was reprimanded. These findings indicate that although the heterosexual matrix may have been less apparent and focused in the Students' Union than non-university spaces, its normative and regulatory frameworks

nevertheless remained in place there.

In this section I have detailed how some participants positioned university space as somewhere they felt more able and comfortable to openly display their gayness through bodily performance than in non-university space. Many were aware of the workings of the heterosexual matrix in non-university space, and self-regulated their behaviour so as not to disrupt it. However, the mixed reports of whether heteronormativity in university space was actually less strict, indicates that the spatial regulations governing performance of non-heterosexualities were less defined, apparent or obvious in higher education settings. 'Doing gay' as performance in university spaces was therefore a highly complex endeavour, and made more difficult by participants having to negotiate the shifting temporality of these environments. As the strength of the heterosexual matrix operating in these settings differed according to time, and consequently the degree to which deviations were allowed from heterosexist ways of being varied, participants were required to be skilled in judging whether and to what extent they had to self-regulate and adapt their behaviour there.

## **Section 2. Making gayness visible**

In addition to the behavioural management detailed above, some participants also performatively expressed their gayness at university by engaging in deliberate masquerades of 'self-conscious homosexual discourse' (Mizejewski 1999 p. 238). Akin to Gay Pride marches (Valentine 1996), Gay Games (Waite 2005), overt expressions of same-sex intimacy in public spaces (Lim 2004) and an openly gay lesbian taking her partner to the High School prom (Rasmussen 2004b), these practices noticeably problematised and disrupted assumptions of space being supposedly 'naturally' straight (Bondi and Davidson 2004; Brickell 2000; Pritchard et al. 2002).

Thus, in contrast to hiding or downplaying their sexuality, some participants made it exaggeratedly visible through their bodily performance. These incidents were strategically undertaken to deliberately queer space and provoke reactions of discomfort, disgust and / or aversion (as Jake puts it below, to '*gross people out*'). I argue that these episodes demonstrate participants to be highly skilled and knowing in utilising and managing gay discourses (both physically and verbally) to achieve desired outcomes. I also propose that the unease and panicked reactions of some flatmates to

participants making visible and explicit their sexuality (even when it was through obvious pantomime) made apparent their latent heterosexism and homophobia.

At the start of uni one of my gay friends gave me his *Joy of Gay Sex* book. That's in my bedroom and I always get it out to sort of like gross people out – 'Oh look at this'. (Jake)

I just want to like gross out some of my friends. It goes back to sort of like winding people up a little bit and pushing their buttons and just seeing how far you can go really ... They'll call me 'Straightboy' and I'm like 'Yeah, only until I see you, you just get like all these urges in me and I don't know what to do with them' ... And like I will just put my arm on his leg or something. (Toby)

[My boyfriend] winds him up a lot and tries to flirt with him and stuff ... My flatmate has not had a girlfriend since he's been at university so we wind him up and go 'Oh are you sure you're not gay?' ... We just wind him up going he's gay and stuff. (James)

Purposefully presenting flatmates with intimate physical details of gay sex, pretending to be sexually attracted to heterosexual males within the group, and jokingly questioning a flatmate's heterosexuality were the physical and verbal strategies Jake, Toby and James (and his boyfriend) used to forcefully shift discourses surrounding their gayness into the public domain. These micro level processes of showing a book, speaking a few words and placing a hand on someone's leg were enough to disturb and disrupt the assumed heterosexual order, and reveal the instability and fragility of the hierarchy and dominance of sexual discourses (Johnson 2008).

These participants' behaviour spatially and temporally troubled the dominance of heterosexuality (albeit only temporarily). However, they said they had not done so to rebut and subvert the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality, or make a political statement or social comment regarding sexual power relations within space. Instead, participants stated they were only '*winding people up*' and '*pushing their buttons*' (Toby) or '*just making a joke out of it*' (Todd). The one exception was Daniel, who made visible his sexuality with the express intention to offend.

Sometimes, and I know this is quite bad, I use my sexuality to make people feel uncomfortable. If I don't like them or if they maybe are being a bit offensive I will use my sexuality and I will be grotesque to just offend them - being really grotesque and like being quite crude in what I say. And that does offend people and then I just use that to my advantage sometimes [laughs]. I think it's a two way street, definitely. (Daniel)

Although Daniel expressed slight misgivings at behaving in such ways, he nevertheless viewed doing so as a legitimate means of attack and retaliation against those people he found '*a bit offensive*' – thereby seeming to confirm Freud's comment cited earlier which conceptualised wit as anger turned sideways. In detailing how he purposefully and aggressively utilised his gayness, Daniel challenged the notion of non-heterosexualities being passive, weak and ineffectual, and reconfigured gayness as a powerful force. As he later stated with regard to his sexuality, '*Why make it into a negative? It's not necessarily a negative. It can be positive and you can use it to your advantage*'.

As noted above, reactions to the social visibility of non-heterosexualities in the Students' Union were only positive when the gayness was viewed as 'safe' - i.e. non-threatening to heterosexual dominance and ideology<sup>44</sup>. However, even with the (assumed) knowledge that participants' behaviours were acts most often meant for amusement and not serious attempts to undermine or overthrow compulsory heterosexuality, flatmates (particularly heterosexual males) tended to experience these episodes as unsettling and threatening, thereby illustrating the shifts in power and subversions in dominance when participants queered space. This unease and discomfort was apparent in Daniel, Toby and James' accounts, who reported respectively of their flatmates '*They were just a bit like shocked sort of thing*', '*He was like "Shut up, shut up, shut up"*' and '*He found it very uncomfortable*'. I propose that such reactions may partly be explained by flatmates' dislike of participants assuming the role of 'bad' gays and foregrounding their (non-hetero)sexuality. Participants therefore achieved their aims of '*grossing people out*', but this was at the price of understanding that their flatmates' acceptance of their sexuality may have been conditional on them keeping their gayness hidden, or at least subdued (i.e. if they are 'good' gays).

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<sup>44</sup> As embodied by such figures as Alan Carr, Larry Grayson, John Inman and Dale Winton.

Common in all participants' narratives when addressing the negotiation of their gayness at university (be it verbally through coming out stories, or physically through their behaviour) was an awareness that their straight peers had boundaries of (in)tolerance and (un)acceptability as regards the expression of non-heterosexualities. This sensitivity was also apparent in participants' accounts of when they purposefully made their gayness visible, in that they sought to determine their male flatmates' individual and unique levels of tolerance to gauge the extent to which they could 'safely' undertake such performances - or as Toby previously stated, of '*seeing how far you can really go*'. Both James and Jake were aware of and were reluctant not to cross what they determined to be their flatmates' boundaries and limits, with Jake stating '*I wouldn't go too far*'. Whilst James set these borders in accordance to his own hypothesised level of tolerance in that particular situation, Jake's flatmates had already established and made known their boundaries through previous verbal warnings and reprimands.

One of the girls' boyfriends, he found it very uncomfortable. But I never really pushed it with him ... I find myself telling my boyfriend no, whoa, there's the boundary, stop it, stop winding him up sort of thing ... My [male] flatmate is the most laid-back sort of chilled typical surfer type person, but I always think there's gonna be a point, so you go so far. I guess I judge it on me. Like I can take a joke very well, but if you took it too far I'd get pissed off, so if I think I'd get pissed off at this point I'd stop. (James)

I know what they can sort of take. I wouldn't go too far, I know what the limit is and how much I can play up to it all ... I have probably said things and he has sort of turned and said 'Don't you dare' or 'Oh fuck off, don't say that'. (Jake)

It is interesting that James engaged in such overt and excessive behaviour and '*pushed it*' with his flatmate, but not with his friend's boyfriend who was someone outside of his domestic group. Jake also spoke of the closeness of relationships as being determinants in whether he made his gayness visible or not, stating '*I don't think I sort of played up to it as much in the first year because I sort of hadn't sussed them out yet and I didn't know them as well*'. As participants only acted in this way with their flatmates with whom they felt comfortable and safe, it appears they undertook a process of deliberation before behaving in such ways similar to their previously discussed judgements in determining who to come out / not to come out to (see Chapter 7). In both instances

they sought to predict people's likely responses to their actions, which then informed whether they made their gayness visible or not. Therefore, although participants may have reported close, positive and supportive relationships with flatmates and peers, they were nevertheless aware of boundaries and thresholds of tolerance and acceptance which they would not transgress.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed participants' expertise as social actors within the university setting. Through interrogation of their accounts of space and behaviour, I argue that physical performance was an important means by which participants produced, played out, expressed and negotiated their sexuality (i.e. 'did gay') within higher education. Many perceived and experienced university spaces as less restrictive and more tolerant than non-university spaces, and somewhere they felt more able and comfortable to freely and overtly express their sexuality. However, some participants reported an awareness that these environments were still governed and regulated by the norms, assumptions and expectations of compulsory heterosexuality.

Therefore, participants had to continuously (re)position themselves against dominant heterosexist discourses, and the corresponding rules and regulations dictating and governing 'appropriate' behaviour. They invested much energy and attention in reading spatial, temporal and relationship factors and contexts to determine if, how and to what extent they were able and allowed to make visible their gayness. These assessments influenced participants' evaluations of spaces as gay friendly or gay intolerant, and they monitored and adapted their behaviour accordingly. Such impression management included acting straight, de-gayng themselves (such as by refraining from expressing same-sex intimacy), and not frequenting particular spaces at particular times (e.g. the Students' Union on sports society nights). Such behaviour can be read as participants bowing to dictums of heteronormativity that non-heterosexualities be invisible and silent discourses, and thereby playing a part in (re)inscribing the heterosexual matrix and their own repression.

Nevertheless, some participants purposefully queered university space by making their gayness visible and explicit, demonstrating that in spite of regulatory frameworks and mechanisms striving to maintain it as such, straight space within higher education

actually is not compulsory, non-resistive or non-transgressive. I propose that in adopting different performances in different contexts with different 'audiences' for different reasons, participants displayed further their exemplary sensitivity, awareness and skill in managing and negotiating their identities as gay students at university – as I summarise in the following Conclusion.



## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION: LIVING DIFFERENTLY

The deconstructive approach puts key concepts ‘under erasure’. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable – ‘good to think with’ – in their ordinary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them. (Hall 1996 p. 1)

This thesis has been framed, built upon and shaped by stories – stories of murder (Matthew Shepard), victim stories of heterosexism and homophobia in both university and non-university spaces, procedural stories of how this study was designed and undertaken, personal stories of how I approached this project through my autobiography of the question, and reflexive stories of how I experienced the research process. However, the focus of this work has been on my participants’ stories of being gay students at university. Before writing this chapter I re-read the thesis to summarise the main points and arguments of the study, and was reminded of how evocative, rich, nuanced and varied these accounts were.

Particular stories stand out for me, being snapshots which produce a montage of the interview data – Alex wanting to attend a university overseas following the death of his father and his national service, Jack deliberately taking telephone calls from his boyfriend in the garden to be out of earshot of his father, Ollie labelling himself as *‘the only gay in the village’* and also having to move out of his accommodation because of homophobic flatmates, Ben talking of his grandmother and her *‘network of old lady spies’*, Jake’s organisations of his *Brokeback Mountain* ‘viewings’, Harry holding hands with his boyfriend in the Students’ Union, Will recounting how his female flatmate had not responded particularly well to him coming out, and Toby *‘winding up’* his male flatmate by pretending to be attracted to him. These are stories of sadness, difference, fear and victimisation, yet also of humour, fun, resistance, transgression and empowerment. Therefore, as has been demonstrated throughout the thesis and is reiterated in this Conclusion, the gay student experience should not be reduced to victimised / non-victimised binary accounts.

To conclude this thesis, I address the research questions (Section 1), and propose suggestions for further study (Section 2). Then, I suggest that stories of the gay experience are shaped by spatial and temporal factors, and in tracing gay social history argue that stories are products of their particular times. As detailed in Chapter 2, the literature on gay people in general and gay students in particular is a narrowly-focussed body of work firmly centred around harassment, heterosexism and homophobia. My study has demonstrated that the university experiences of gay students are not limited to these particular and partial portrayals, but are considerably more rich, varied and nuanced. I therefore question the appropriateness of the martyr-target-victim discourse in accounting for contemporary gay student life – or, to use Hall’s term from the above extract on the deconstructive critique of essentialist concepts of identity (which neatly summarises the main argument of this thesis), I place it ‘under erasure’<sup>45</sup> (Section 3). Finally, I present some concluding remarks – and ‘new stories’.

### **Section 1. Research questions**

In this section I answer the research questions which framed this study. Addressing each of these reiterates the main findings and themes of the project, as raised in the previous five analysis chapters of this thesis.

- In what ways does the (non-hetero)sexuality of gay male undergraduate students intersect with their lives within higher education?

Participants’ gayness intersected with and shaped many aspects of their student lives and university experiences. For example, in Chapter 5 I noted how it influenced their decisions about which institutions to apply (and also not apply) to. Some of the factors reported to be important in these choices, such as the size of the city in which the university was located, its distance from the family home and position in academic league tables, and subject availability, were unrelated to sexuality. Additionally, I argued that these decisions were embedded within and heavily determined by class position, with participants’ middle-class status meaning that they were not only able to move away from home to study, but were expected to do so. Furthermore, some participants reported feeling at home and belonging at an elite institution, which I suggested was due

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<sup>45</sup> Although Hall indicates that this can only be an attempt and isn’t actually possible.

also to their class status.

However, some participants noted that their sexuality was another significant influence on their university choices. This was most apparent in those decisions that were characterised by spatial displacement and migration. Many participants selected universities requiring a move away from home environments they perceived to be intolerant of non-heterosexualities, and thus experienced as restrictive in the extent to which they could address and live out their gayness. Jack, for example, related that he kept his phone on silent and took calls from his boyfriend in his garden because his father *'wasn't too pleased'* about him being in same-sex relationship, or about him being gay. Other participants also felt they had to maintain their sexuality as a silent discourse in their home communities, with Ben saying that he would be *'lynched'* should it be known he was gay there, and Jake stating that *'every time you go out in my home town it's just like "Eurghh are you gay?"'*

Such intolerance was noted to be particularly strong in rural communities. Participants from such spaces reported that the people there held traditional and conservative attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and that non-heterosexuality was consequently an invisible or non-issue. For example, Ollie related feeling that he was *'the only gay in the village'*, and Simon said that someone who was gay in his home community would be likened to *'the first man on the moon'*. Some participants also spoke of the constant surveillance within these spaces, such as Ben's Grandmother and her *'network of old lady spies'*, which meant they had to monitor their behaviour to ensure against any leakage of their gayness.

Thus, some participants' university choices were influenced by their sexuality as they wanted to move away from home communities they perceived as, and / or experienced to be, as intolerant, heterosexist and homophobic. In addition, some participants explained that they based their decisions on their desire to move towards spaces where they would be able to more freely address, explore and live out their gayness than at home. Hence, they selected institutions in places with visible and active gay communities, where they could embed themselves in gay social networks. The size of the local gay scene was very important to some participants, with Vivian saying it was the determining factor in his decisions of where to study, and Matthew placing it above

academic concerns in selecting an institution. One practical implication from this particular finding is that universities wishing to encourage applications from gay people could consider highlighting in their promotional materials the facilities available at the institution and in the locale for non-heterosexualities (e.g. the gay scene and whether there is a student LGBT Society). The University of Manchester actually does this, highlighting the city's Gay Village in its recruitment information ([www.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.manchester.ac.uk)).

My participants found that their relationships with flatmates were, at least in part, mediated through questions of sexuality (Chapter 6). In some cases, flatmates positioned them as teachers about gayness, asking questions about their non-heterosexuality (e.g. its aetiology, participants' school experiences, and sexual matters). Some participants also self-assumed such positions to 'educate' these groups on issues of non-heterosexuality. I noted how different participants adopted different ways of doing this, with Noah and Daniel's softly-softly approach contrasting with Jake's more activist organisations of '*a viewing*' of *Brokeback Mountain*. Also, as discussed in Chapter 7, the assumption and expectation of compulsory heterosexuality meant that all participants had to address issues and questions of coming out to their flatmates. Although participants had different pre-university coming out biographies, they all started university at the same stage of not being out to any of these people. Therefore, they all had to determine if, when and how to disclose their sexuality to them. Further ways in which participants' gayness intersected with their relationships with flatmates are elaborated upon below in my responses to the research questions concerning participants' university experiences, and how they negotiated their sexuality in higher education.

Thus, participants reported that their sexuality influenced and impacted upon their university choice, relationships with flatmates, and having to address issues of disclosing their gayness. However, these accounts jarred with their assertions of the (un)importance and (in)significance of their gayness in their university lives, as discussed below in my response to the second research question.

- What importance and significance do these students ascribe their sexuality in influencing, impacting upon and shaping their university experiences?

A major and recurring theme in this thesis has concerned participants' downplaying the role and significance of their gayness in their lives at university. In Chapter 4 I identified a number of discursive strategies they commonly and frequently used to assert that their gayness was but a peripheral, minor and unimportant part of their identities. Many of these techniques were apparent in the penpictures participants had written, where they stated that their gayness was not significant (*'I am gay but this fact is not a really important thing in my life'* [Alex]), framed it as only part of a multi-faceted identity (*'I see it as only a small fragment of my personality and character'* [Harry], *'I feel there is much more to me than my sexuality'* [Toby]), and also de-centred it by locating it on the margins of self-identification (*'[It's] not a defining aspect'* [Harry], *'I do not feel it is the central focus of who I am'* [Noah]).

Participants presented their sexuality as unremarkable, and limited its influence not only in their penpictures, but in their accounts of how they lived as gay university students too. For example, some expressed unwillingness to talk only of gay issues with their flatmates, strongly argued that they had personalised their bedrooms in accordance to personal taste rather than their sexuality (hence the presence of gay signifiers in these spaces was unintentional), and coming out was not viewed as a priority or even a necessity by some participants because of the insignificance and unimportance they gave this part of themselves.

In working to present themselves as not being governed by their sexuality, and severing any influence of their gayness on how they conducted and experienced their everyday lives as gay students (*'it doesn't control me, or my actions'* – Alex's penpicture), participants inhabited the positions of neoliberal subjects (Chapter 4). They most evidently assumed the role of being active shapers of their gay student biographies when discussing their university choices (Chapter 5), which were considered and deliberate. Participants purposefully selected institutions requiring a move away from restrictive home communities and / or moves towards places where they could freely address their sexuality. Participants' agency in self-constructing their student lives was also demonstrated in their reports of coming out at university (Chapter 7). Like their university choices, determining if, when and how to come out were carefully deliberated. Therefore, participants took control of their higher education experience through making choices to maximise their opportunities to live out their gayness at

university as they wanted. Furthermore, constructing their gay student biographies in these ways locates participants away from the passive and disempowering martyr-target-victim model.

However, despite most participants downplaying their sexuality in the above ways, there were contradictions between these assertions and their reports of the extent to which their gayness did actually play a role in their university lives. Its influence on participants' decisions on which institutions to attend has already been discussed above. Also, as detailed in Chapter 7, some participants stated that one of the reasons they had come out to their flatmates was because their sexuality '*was part of who I am*' (Todd), '*a big part of who I am*' (Matthew), and even '*a really important part*' (Noah) and '*It's what I am, it's who I am*' (Vivian). Conversely, Eli stated that he had not come out to his flatmates because '*I would be kind of putting a burden on the people I tell*'. Yet, as noted in the chapter, his gayness cannot be a burden if it carries no importance, significance or weight. However, perhaps the most glaring contradiction was that despite asserting that their gayness was a non-issue, participants had come forward to take part in this study which they knew had their sexuality as its central focus.

- What are the experiences of these students at university, and how do they frame, relate, make sense and make meaning of these experiences?

Participants' accounts of their university experiences rarely corresponded to those of overwhelming struggle and hardship commonly reported in the academic literature and detailed in Chapter 2. Instead, their narratives were nuanced and layered, and defied binary classification as either positive or negative.

Participants did report that gayness was given voice and expression in their student accommodation, both through their own teaching and flatmates asking questions (Chapter 6). Therefore, it was not a silent or forbidden discourse, as it was in many of their home communities (Chapter 5). Furthermore, participants' coming out stories deviated from traditional disclosure narratives which fit firmly in the martyr-target-victim framework (Chapter 7). Harry, for example, stated that his flatmates were '*absolutely amazing about it*', which related not only the positive responses to him coming out, but also his expectation of negativity to the disclosure. Also, many

participants perceived university space as more gay-friendly than non-university space, and felt able to display same-sex intimacy on campus (Chapter 8). Thus, university space was presented as being somewhere non-heterosexualities could co-exist harmoniously with the dominant straight sexual discourse.

In spite of this, I did not find that gay students never experience homophobia and victimization, nor do I claim that all gay students have a carefree time within higher education. For example, Will had encountered harassment and been shouted at because of being visibly identifiable as gay, Ollie moved into alternative accommodation to escape from his flatmates' homonegativity and homophobia, and Toby recounted how his gay friend had been the target of homophobia in halls. Thus, being non-heterosexual may problematise gay students' living situations when they are housed with people who harbour homophobic / heterosexist attitudes and opinions, for (disrupting contact theory) day-to-day interaction with an openly gay person does not always guarantee 'gay friendly' flatmates. Although participants reported few incidents of homophobic harassment, they were distressing and disruptive when they happened. Consequently, universities concerned with sexual equality will need to consider how to respond to such events, what the strategies might be and how they would both deal with perpetrators and support victims of abuse.

I also argued that participants had to be highly skilled and sensitive when addressing their sexuality with their flatmates, as not all these people were reported to be gay friendly. For example, some made anti-gay comments whose intent was often difficult to determine (and which participants sometimes experienced as offensive), and were uncomfortable when faced with evidence of participants' gayness and reprimanded them. Participants' also reported that some flatmates had less than positive initial reactions to their coming out disclosures (with Toby's friend even terminating his relationship with him after he came out), held heterosexist and homophobic attitudes, and even engaged in threatening behaviour towards them. Therefore, being gay did mean that some participants faced particular challenges at university, and the martyr-target-victim framework was not a completely redundant or inappropriate model within which to locate these gay students' higher education experiences.

- What practices and strategies do these students employ in ‘doing gay’ (i.e. expressing, negotiating and managing their sexuality) at university?

This thesis has detailed how participants lived out their gayness at university in a variety of ways, including pedagogically by educating flatmates through different means on homosexuality (Chapter 6), verbally by making public their gayness through coming out disclosures (Chapter 7), and performatively through bodily management and performance (Chapter 8).

These ways of ‘doing gay’ were undertaken against the expectation, assumption, dominance and privilege of straightness. As detailed in Chapter 1, the theoretical starting point of this study was that university space, like all non-gay-specific spaces, was governed by the heteronormative workings of the heterosexual matrix. Thus, through the promotion of straight discourses and also the regulation of alternative ways of being, higher education space is produced and maintained as dominantly straight. This was supported by participants’ accounts of student accommodation space being homo- and hetero-sexualised through the practices of both flatmates and themselves (Chapter 6). The space was queered – that is, heteronormativity was disrupted – by my participants’ presence, voice and expression of their sexuality in a variety of ways. However, in some cases male flatmates’ physical and verbal behaviour reinscribed hegemonic heterosexual masculinities and student accommodation space as straight.

I returned to issues of space and sexuality in Chapter 8 where I deconstructed participants’ accounts of their bodily performance in university settings. Although these environments were viewed as permitting more freedom and open expression of non-heterosexuality than non-university spaces, participants were nonetheless aware of the workings of heteronormativity there, and monitored and managed their behaviour accordingly. I detailed how the Students’ Union was a university space that posed particular challenges for gay students. It was somewhere the strength of heteronormativity and the degree to which deviations were allowed from discourses of heterosexual masculinities fluctuated, depending on who was there at a particular time. However, some participants took advantage of the possibility of playing with gender that the Students’ Union provided. Since they knew the heterosexual assumption meant that if their behaviour was read as gay it would not be taken seriously or as a true reflection



of their sexuality, they were enabled to relax or abandon self-censorship of their actions. Participants were therefore sensitive to space, time and people – determining if, when, how and to what extent they could openly express their gayness in physical ways in higher education settings.

As a final reflexive aside, I note how my own behaviour during the undertaking of this study reflected my wariness about being totally open about my gayness in university spaces. I wrote most of this thesis in coffee shops around campus, and I deliberately made sure that any books with the word ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ in their titles were always placed face down on the table so their front covers did not show. Also, if people who did not know my sexuality asked what I was working on I answered it was a study on bullying, and before taking my laptop to university every morning I made sure to change the screensaver, which was usually of men I found attractive, to show a desert or outer space instead. At one level these actions reflect my own personal unease about being identified as gay, but they also indicate the limits to the ‘gay friendliness’ of university spaces.

Participants’ expectations of university being somewhere they would be freer to ‘be themselves’ and express and live out their gay identities than in their home communities were therefore met, but required some qualification. In both their student accommodation and various settings around the university they reported awareness that there were unspoken but nevertheless deeply felt rules of appropriate behaviour, which could be coded as heterosexual and hegemonically masculine. Thus, although they did not actually use the terms ‘heterosexual matrix’ or ‘heteronormativity’, participants recognised and were sensitive to their workings in higher education, and were active in making choices as to how to negotiate these structures of power.

Participants therefore had to position themselves against the dominant straight sexual discourses at university, and decide whether to obey or problematise the workings of heteronormativity. I argued that those who did not challenge behaviour which repressed or silenced gayness were complicit in legitimising heteronormativity. For example, Jake did not say anything to his flatmates about their ‘*Oh bloody gays*’ comments, and refrained from bringing his visibly gay friends back to his accommodation; Ollie stayed in his room to avoid his flatmates’ intimidating and homophobic behaviour, and

furthered their wishes that gayness be a non-discourse in their accommodation by moving out of the space; and other participants did not challenge or resist being labelled by their flatmates as '*you fag*', '*straight boy*' or '*mincer*'.

Heteronormativity was also reinscribed by participants managing their behaviour so as not to disrupt the heterosexual matrix. For example, Jack said he would not engage in displays of same-sex intimacy in the Students' Union, and Matthew and Toby stated they would not frequent this space when people from sports societies were there. In maintaining these spaces as apparently exclusively straight, participants assisted in positioning heterosexuality as the dominant (and even the only legitimate) sexual discourse, since it was the only one given voice and presence.

Participants also legitimised heteronormativity at university in employing reverse relative deprivation. That is, they framed homophobic or unpleasant incidents as positive because they were not as bad as they could have been. They also explained, justified and therefore dismissed any anti-gay behaviour, excusing it because flatmates had never met an openly gay person before, had religious beliefs stating that homosexuality was wrong, had been brought up in homophobic environments, or were just participating in and adhering to cultural norms of heterosexual masculinities.

In sum, university was a space which participants perceived and experienced as being more tolerant and supportive of non-heterosexualities than non-university environments, and where they felt able to address, explore and engage with their sexuality more freely than in their home communities. Furthermore, participants were highly skilled and sensitive in negotiating their gay identities in higher education; demonstrated emotional intelligence and social sensitivity in their dealings with flatmates and peers; navigated any boundaries and restrictions regarding the display and performance of their homosexuality with skill; and reported infrequent incidents of anti-gay behaviour rather than a catalogue of persecution and harassment.

## **Section 2. Further research**

In Chapter 3 I detailed and provided a rationale for how this study was conceived, designed and undertaken. Reflections on this methodology, and particularly the research design and sampling frame, inform my suggestions for further research on the gay student university experience.

For example, this project was designed to provide a 'snapshot' of participants' lives within higher education, and so their two interviews were conducted within a month of each other. My findings and conclusions could therefore be complemented by longitudinal studies. In 'shadowing' gay students through longer periods of their time at university, these projects could detail further the shifting and fluid role sexuality plays in their everyday lives within higher education. For example, such research could trace how gayness mediates affiliations with flatmates and how these relationships grow, develop and change over this time; examine the long term consequences of coming out to flatmates and not just their initial responses; and provide additional insight into the temporal nature of the workings of the heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity in different university spaces.

As noted in Chapter 3, I was pleased that I had recruited a diverse sample for this study. The mix of participants of different ages and nationalities, on different degree subjects and in different years of study, and at different levels of outness, interest and engagement with their sexuality, resulted in a rich and layered data set with which to work. However, research with different sampling frames would provide additional insight into how non-heterosexual identities are negotiated in higher education.

For example, I have detailed my rationale for recruiting only gay male students for this study. However, few projects have addressed the university lives of self-identified lesbian and bisexual students (Carter 2000), and transgender issues in higher education have been neglected (Ryan and Rivers 2003). Research on the experiences of these students would further understanding of diversity and non-heterosexual identity management and experience within university.

My reasons for recruiting my sample from the same institution also have been previously discussed in Chapter 3. As such, the stories recounted in this study are local to the specific cultural, social and academic workings of the particular university participants attended. Recruiting participants from different institutions would enable identification and comparison of localized and shared experiences. In fact, it would be most interesting to conduct a UK study of gay students on a national scale akin to Rankin's (2003) research on US campuses (as detailed in Chapter 2) to gauge at a macro-level an indication of how this population experiences contemporary life in higher education. However, such a project would obviously require and be dependent on securing significant funding.

The sample of such a national study would enable a detailed examination of the ways in which gay students' experiences are influenced and intersected by not just their sexuality, but factors such as nationality, class, age and degree subject. Work on how gay students negotiate additional differences that make a difference would be timely with New Labour's objective of widening participation and access to university-level education (Archer 2007). Following reports of racism and segregation in society, at university, and within the gay community (Reynolds 2007), a particularly rich area of research could be on how gay students from ethnic minorities manage a double stigma in higher education. Exploring the interrelation of these factors would provide a multi-layered and nuanced account of what it means to be a gay student at university today.

I hope that the dissemination of this study through various forms stimulates and encourages further investigation into the lives of gay students, be it in the ways suggested above or otherwise. As I have illustrated throughout this thesis and summarise and conclude in the following section, accounts of the gay student experience do not always map on to discourses of woundedness, disempowerment and victimization. Therefore, I hope also that such research be undertaken without the presumption, focus or favouring of 'sob stories'.

### Section 3. New stories

Even as we think we are hearing the most authentic, ‘personal’ account, the same old stories are ringing in our ears.  
(Silverman 1989 pp. 38-39)

In the Introduction (Chapter 1) I detailed Williams’ (1977) conceptualisations of dominant, emergent and residual social practices. In Chapter 2 I then positioned the Matthew Shepard murder as an exemplar of the dominant story of the gay student experience, and noted how this incident had contributed to the widely-shared assumption that higher education for this population is characterised by difficulty, struggle, harassment and assault – which confounds any expectations of university being liberal, tolerant, and accepting of diversity and difference. Indeed, such is the prevalence and potency of this tale of victimisation that some of my participants considered their alternative accounts of their gay student experiences which did not correspond to it to be of little (if any) significance or interest to me.

As also discussed in Chapter 2, this study was inspired by and followed Rofes’ (2004) critique of the common practice of locating gay people within what he terms a martyr-target-victim framework, and how this consequently provides only a restricted, particular and partial insight into their lives and experiences. Throughout this thesis I have identified instances when my participants’ reports of their gay student biographies did not map on to those reported typically in academic literature, or fit within this framework. This study therefore challenges the assumption that the only accounts to be told about gay student life (and, furthermore, the only legitimate and worthwhile accounts) are those built around fear and victimisation. I propose that these correspond to ‘the same old stories’ in Silverman’s above quote.

Such discrepancies between how gay student life is portrayed in the literature and how my participants reported it to be actually lived out indicate that dominant (i.e. negative) stories are not wholly appropriate in reflecting the contemporary gay student experience. Savin-Williams (2005) has also observed that ‘there’s a gap between what is being achieved in the real world of contemporary [gay] teenagers and what is acknowledged by researchers and scholars’ (p. x). In my discussion of coming out (Chapter 7), I proposed that the discrepancies between my participants’ disclosure experiences and

those of anxiety, fearfulness, harassment and rejection that constitute the dominant accounts in the academic literature could be explained by temporal differences, that stories of gay experience are shaped by and embedded within the social, cultural, political and legal climates in which they are told. The dominant coming out narrative and the martyr-target victim framework were produced and reflected gay life at a particular time. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are not wholly relevant in accounting for or mirroring my participants' experiences.

Scholars in much earlier work have noted that history transforms the gay experience, and that different times give rise to different experiences – and, consequently, 'new' stories.

A young person dealing with being gay in the 1970s has an entirely different set of historical-cultural conditions to ease the development of a positive gay identity from that of a person who grew up in the early 1900s. (Kimmel 1978 p. 124)

For 20-year-olds in the present study, coming out in the early 1970s when gay liberation began to blossom in North America was a much different kind of experience from what 40-year-olds encountered during the 1950s as McCarthy conducted his homosexual and communist witchhunts. (McDonald 1982 p. 57)

As experiences are therefore temporally (and spatially) determined, to see how the martyr-target-victim story was shaped and positioned as dominant, I trace below in broad strokes gay social history. This exercise also contextualises my participants' accounts by locating them as products of 'the dramatic shifts that have taken place over the past sixty years in this world we have won' (Weeks 2007 p. ix).

The 1950s and 1960s have been described as 'the era of the "closet homosexual", when those in hiding simply assumed that violence and harassment, even blackmail and complete ostracism, were a way of life' (Herdt and Boxer 1993 p. 5). This time was characterised by 'heterosexual dictatorship' (Weeks 2007 p. 9) where 'the climate of fear was endemic' (Herdt and Boxer 1993 p. 33) and gayness was something to be ashamed of, framed as immoral and deviant (despite homosexuality being partly decriminalised in the Sexual Offences Act 1967).

Following the Stonewall riots in 1969, there was an increased gay voice, recognition and presence 'on the streets'. Bell and Weinberg (1978) noted some positive changes in the social climate of the US for gay people in the 1970s, with an increase in the number of states decriminalising same-sexual activities, and coming out disclosures being made by 'well-known and highly regarded persons' (p.68). A further reflection of a more 'gay friendly' US was that homosexuality was no longer classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association after 1973 (although it remained so in the UK until 1988) (Rose 1994). However, being identifiable as gay in the early 1970s was still reported to be negative. In contrast to the above legal reforms, Bell (1976) reported that the vast majority of Americans at this time regarded gayness as 'disgusting' and 'very much obscene'. D'Augelli (2003) provides a most interesting reflexive account of being a gay man in the US in this era, relating that such was the oppressive and pervasive homophobia he could not tell army doctors during his physical examinations that he was gay - even though doing so would have meant he would not have been drafted for service during Vietnam. Plummer's (1975) statements that 'always, in this culture, the costs of being known as a homosexual; must be high' (p. 175), and that 'failure to "pass", failure to maintain a convincing heterosexual front, failure to keep one's "cool", may have dire consequences' (ibid. p. 176), indicate a similar social climate for gay people in the UK at this time.

Trends of increased visibility continued in the 1980s. According to Uhrig (1984), young gay people were 'refusing to hide who they are ... standing up for their rights; they are affirming their sexual identities as a positive force in their lives' (p. 117). Hence, there was a significant increase in coming out disclosures in this period. For example, over half of the gay males in the samples in the studies by Bell and Weinberg (1978), Jay and Young (1979) and Schlessinger (1982) had not directly come out to their parents, compared to 60% in Cramer and Roach's (1988) project. Herdt and Boxer's (1993) two year ethnography of a gay youth group in Chicago undertaken in 1987 and 1988 provides a micro-level insight into the issues that gay teens deemed important, and how gayness was experienced and lived at that particular time and in that particular space. The authors relate how some of the group members had lost friends because of rumours that they were gay, dated girls to pass as heterosexual, invented girlfriends to dispel suspicion over their sexuality, reported that parents were not accepting, rejected them, and kicked them out of the family home.

Thus, being gay prior to the 1990s typically meant silence, rejection, living in a climate of fear of harassment, assault, heterosexism and homophobia, and being told that you are immoral, wrong, deviant, disgusting and obscene. However, as has been demonstrated in this thesis, the martyr-target-victim framework is not appropriate in mirroring contemporary ways of being.

My participants live in a society reporting increasingly positive attitudes and acceptance of gay people and homosexuality (e.g. Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2005; Hicks and Lee 2006), where the age of consent is the same as that for heterosexuals, where homosexuality is neither a mental illness nor a criminal activity, where gays are no longer hanged or imprisoned, where they can have their relationships legally recognised through Civil Partnerships, and where legislation protects them against discrimination in the workplace. They can also join the university LGBT Society, walk into gay bars and clubs without fear of being raided, meet other gay people on the internet, and openly discuss gay issues with their flatmates. In other words, they live their lives as gay people in ways that previous generations could not, and also perhaps even could not have conceived. As Weeks (2007) notes, ‘attitudes have surely changed in fundamental ways. We are living now, clearly, in a different world’ (p. 3) where ‘homosexuality has come out of the shadows’ (ibid. p. 9). Therefore, as participants inhabit a different social, cultural and legal space to previous generations of gay people, it follows that their experiences (and hence their stories) of being gay will be different.

My participants’ accounts indicate that martyr-target-victim stories are becoming increasingly outdated, irrelevant and inappropriate in accounting for, reflecting and framing understanding of contemporary gay student stories and experiences – in the words of Hall’s extract which opened this chapter, they are ‘no longer serviceable’. This thesis has been a space where participants’ alternative accounts have been presented, and given the same attention and focus as victimised stories. In time, just as Williams’ (1977) proposes that emergent social practices may become dominant, so these non-victimised accounts may become positioned as the primary stories of the gay experience. They may appear unexciting and undramatic (or what Savin-Williams (2005) terms ‘unnoteworthy banality’ [p. 222]) when compared to the grand, mythic content of those that assimilate into the martyr-target-victim framework. However, they do provide a more accurate reflection of what life is like for gay students *today*.



## Concluding remarks

Professionals may have lost contact with and thus distorted the lives of gay male and lesbian rank and file by emphasising the negative in our history and culture. We may have lost sight of our resiliency and our joy. (Savin-Williams 1990 p. 25)

As has been detailed throughout this thesis and reiterated above, my participants did indeed 'live differently' to the gay students reported in the academic literature. However, this study is not a challenge to, or an argument against, traditional accounts of gay student life. The reports of harassment, victimization and fear reported in Chapter 2 should not be dismissed or rejected. These stories are part of gayness' 'intricate and vital history' (Weeks 2007 p. 81), and it is important not to forget but continue to own where we come from.

Nevertheless, as Weeks et al. (2001) note, 'at the same time as we acknowledge a rich history, we also need to recognise crucial contemporary changes in the life stories of those who have been forced to live outside ... the "heterosexual assumption"' (p. 13). Therefore, I have called attention to the limitations and inappropriateness of the victimized, disempowered, wounded and pathologised framework within which gay students (and gay people in general) have been most often located and defined. As demonstrated repeatedly throughout this thesis, there are stories of the gay student experience outside this limited (and limiting) perspective. These 'are very important [as] they signal both changing perceptions and changing possibilities' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 12). As such, they should be acknowledged in being as relevant, important and legitimate as victimized accounts.

My participants' reports of homophobia and less than positive experiences at university illustrate that these dominant stories are not completely redundant in accounting for and reflecting the gay student experience. However, they should be retired when they no longer do so, and new stories which reflect better contemporary gay life as it is experienced now ushered in. As Plummer (1995) states, 'stories have their times' (p. 126). The 'new' narratives presented in this thesis are just part of what Weeks (2007) describes as 'a world of transition, in the midst of a long, convoluted, messy, unfinished but profound revolution that has transformed the possibilities of living our sexual diversity and creating intimate lives' (p. 3). Thus, the stories that are told of the gay

experience will continue to change and evolve in accordance with societal shifts and changes. The martyr-target-victim tales did once reflect how gayness was primarily lived and experienced, just as my participants' accounts of what it means to be gay at university today are stories of this particular time.

New stories 'may be waiting in the wings for their time, their voice, their audience' (Plummer 1995 p. 16), and they become circulated and potent 'when there is a new audience ready to hear them in communities of meaning and understanding, and when newly vocal groups can have their experiences validated in and through them' (Weeks et al. 2001 p. 12). Reaction to the dissemination of this study will indicate whether scholars, university authorities, student services and gay students themselves are ready and willing to hear and embrace new stories and scripts such as those that have been detailed in this thesis – or not. 'Gay life does not stand still: it continues to evolve' (Reynolds 2007 p. 193), and we need stories to be told, such as those reported in this thesis, that reflect how gayness and the gay experience is constantly redefined, renegotiated, and lived differently.

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